

The
LAKE



MARGARET
ASHMUN

THE LAKE

BY
MARGARET ASHMUN

INCLUDING MOTHER
THE HEART OF ISABEL CARLETON
ISABEL CARLETON AT HOME
ISABEL CARLETON IN THE WEST
ISABEL CARLETON'S FRIENDS
ISABEL CARLETON'S YEAR
MARION FREAR'S SUMMER
MODERN SHORT STORIES
STEPHEN'S LAST CHANCE
SUPPORT
TOPLESS TOWERS: A ROMANCE OF MORN-
INGSIDE HEIGHTS

THE LAKE

BY

MARGARET ASHMUN ✓

1
2
3
4
5
6
7
8
9
10
11
12
13
14
15
16
17
18
19
20
21
22
23
24
25
26
27
28
29
30
31
32
33
34
35
36
37
38
39
40
41
42
43
44
45
46
47
48
49
50
51
52
53
54
55
56
57
58
59
60
61
62
63
64
65
66
67
68
69
70
71
72
73
74
75
76
77
78
79
80
81
82
83
84
85
86
87
88
89
90
91
92
93
94
95
96
97
98
99
100
101
102
103
104
105
106
107
108
109
110
111
112
113
114
115
116
117
118
119
120
121
122
123
124
125
126
127
128
129
130
131
132
133
134
135
136
137
138
139
140
141
142
143
144
145
146
147
148
149
150
151
152
153
154
155
156
157
158
159
160
161
162
163
164
165
166
167
168
169
170
171
172
173
174
175
176
177
178
179
180
181
182
183
184
185
186
187
188
189
190
191
192
193
194
195
196
197
198
199
200
201
202
203
204
205
206
207
208
209
210
211
212
213
214
215
216
217
218
219
220
221
222
223
224
225
226
227
228
229
230
231
232
233
234
235
236
237
238
239
240
241
242
243
244
245
246
247
248
249
250
251
252
253
254
255
256
257
258
259
260
261
262
263
264
265
266
267
268
269
270
271
272
273
274
275
276
277
278
279
280
281
282
283
284
285
286
287
288
289
290
291
292
293
294
295
296
297
298
299
300
301
302
303
304
305
306
307
308
309
310
311
312
313
314
315
316
317
318
319
320
321
322
323
324
325
326
327
328
329
330
331
332
333
334
335
336
337
338
339
340
341
342
343
344
345
346
347
348
349
350
351
352
353
354
355
356
357
358
359
360
361
362
363
364
365
366
367
368
369
370
371
372
373
374
375
376
377
378
379
380
381
382
383
384
385
386
387
388
389
390
391
392
393
394
395
396
397
398
399
400
401
402
403
404
405
406
407
408
409
410
411
412
413
414
415
416
417
418
419
420
421
422
423
424
425
426
427
428
429
430
431
432
433
434
435
436
437
438
439
440
441
442
443
444
445
446
447
448
449
450
451
452
453
454
455
456
457
458
459
460
461
462
463
464
465
466
467
468
469
470
471
472
473
474
475
476
477
478
479
480
481
482
483
484
485
486
487
488
489
490
491
492
493
494
495
496
497
498
499
500
501
502
503
504
505
506
507
508
509
510
511
512
513
514
515
516
517
518
519
520
521
522
523
524
525
526
527
528
529
530
531
532
533
534
535
536
537
538
539
540
541
542
543
544
545
546
547
548
549
550
551
552
553
554
555
556
557
558
559
560
561
562
563
564
565
566
567
568
569
570
571
572
573
574
575
576
577
578
579
580
581
582
583
584
585
586
587
588
589
590
591
592
593
594
595
596
597
598
599
600
601
602
603
604
605
606
607
608
609
610
611
612
613
614
615
616
617
618
619
620
621
622
623
624
625
626
627
628
629
630
631
632
633
634
635
636
637
638
639
640
641
642
643
644
645
646
647
648
649
650
651
652
653
654
655
656
657
658
659
660
661
662
663
664
665
666
667
668
669
670
671
672
673
674
675
676
677
678
679
680
681
682
683
684
685
686
687
688
689
690
691
692
693
694
695
696
697
698
699
700
701
702
703
704
705
706
707
708
709
710
711
712
713
714
715
716
717
718
719
720
721
722
723
724
725
726
727
728
729
730
731
732
733
734
735
736
737
738
739
740
741
742
743
744
745
746
747
748
749
750
751
752
753
754
755
756
757
758
759
760
761
762
763
764
765
766
767
768
769
770
771
772
773
774
775
776
777
778
779
780
781
782
783
784
785
786
787
788
789
790
791
792
793
794
795
796
797
798
799
800
801
802
803
804
805
806
807
808
809
810
811
812
813
814
815
816
817
818
819
820
821
822
823
824
825
826
827
828
829
830
831
832
833
834
835
836
837
838
839
840
84

New York

THE MACMILLAN COMPANY

1924

All rights reserved

Copy 3

PZ3

Ag267

Lia

Copy 2

**COPYRIGHT, 1924,
By MARGARET ASHMUN.**

**Set up and electrotyped.
Published September, 1924.**

PRINTED IN THE UNITED STATES OF AMERICA.

SEP 17 1924
© CIA 800897

no 2

E.T. 10-8-2-1.

TO
MARION MAY

Call no man your father upon the earth:
for one is your Father, which is in heaven.

MATTHEW 23:9

BOOK ONE

THE LAKE

CHAPTER I

A MILE and a half from the village the house was; and the village, in turn, was seven miles from town. A lane ran from the curve of the road to the side of the house, and around to the big ramshackle barns backed by a tamarack swamp. The house faced a little lake, toward which the low ground at the front descended. White paint had grown dingy with years, and the slatted green shutters showed dull and rusty. High above the roof rose a group of native hemlocks, which had stood there long before the house was built, when roving Indians kindled their camp fires from the pitchy twigs and cones. Beyond the hemlocks were woods, varying from the light green of butternut to the dark bluish green of spruce.

Ten years ago, the traffic on country roads in the Middle West was not so notable as it is now. In a summer's day, hardly a dozen vehicles passed over the road at the end of the lake. There were farm wagons drawn by slow plodding horses, and top-carriages drawn by single nags or trotting spans. At times an alien honking and chugging warned of the laborious flight of an automobile, plowing painfully through the sand. The white house seemed to claim a remoteness which was

more than its due, because it faced the little lake, and took note of passing caravans only through side windows screened for six months of the year by snowball bushes and highbushed cranberries.

* * * * *

Hubert Faraday used to run down to the foot of the lane when he heard wheels grating over the pebbly place at the end of the lake. Standing on the lower board of the wide wagon gate, and clinging on with his bare toes, he could see the driver's hat or the top of the carriage which was coming. Sometimes a farmer turned from the road into the shallow edge of the lake, and let his unchecked horses put their heads down and drink. Hubert could spy them through a gap in the birches, and he liked to see the eager way in which the horses plunged their noses into the water and held them there, sucking the cool cleanness through their necks. Sometimes they drank so long that the farmer grew impatient, and spatted the lines on the horses' flanks, or called out with uncouth vituperation. Then the horses would lift their dribbling mouths, and shake their heads in the heavy collars, and reluctantly bend their strength to pulling the wagon through the sand and pebbles beneath the water. Hubert did not like to hear the creak of the whiffle-trees and the screech of the wheels. He was too far away to hear the labored breathing of the horses, but he knew how it sounded; he had been with his father when Willard Faraday had driven Whitey and Jack through the little arc of the shore, and he had held to the wagon seat in misery when the horses had been harried from their draught, and hustled up the bank with whip-crackings and sputtering oaths. It was worse when Willard Fara-

day was in one of his fits of anger; for then the whip came down on the horses' backs, and they snorted with exertion and pain. Hubert bit his lips then, to keep from crying out, and he thought of fierce reproaches which he would like to hurl at his father if he dared.

* * * * *

Hubert was twelve now, a square-framed, brown-faced little boy, with blue-grey eyes, too often downcast, and a country lad's allowance of freckles. Hubert was not like his mother, who had black hair and a smooth white face; nor yet, it seemed, like his father, who was dark, too, but thin-featured and spare.

Willard Faraday was a kind man enough, if he had not been subject to periods of melancholy or emotional irritation. In the main, he was good to Hubert. He would speak to him in a friendly way, and would buy him good clothes, and bring home little treats for him from town. But there were times when he would scowl at the boy, or push him aside and pretend not to see him. At these same times he would speak in loud passionate tones to Hubert's mother.

Averil Faraday was a quiet woman, who would have been thought beautiful in a different environment. The country people did not like her black hair, which she wore braided and wound about her head, coronetwise; nor her deep-set eyes, which seemed to them too knowing; nor her white skin, which kept its smoothness in the heat of summer and the cold of winter. She was a country woman, like any other housewife in the district; but somehow there was a difference. The mother who, back in New York State, had called her little girl Averil had made an unconscious blunder. There was

nothing of the freshness of April about Averil Faraday; she should have been called Octavia, if it is true that that name suggests a dark and somber quiescence.

The situation of the farm was not a cheerful one for a woman, though its air of seclusion was produced chiefly by its facing away from the road and toward the lake, and by its background of tall hemlocks and shadowed grove. Any woman might feel that she could do with a more neighbourly place to live, thought the women who drove by on their way to the village or the town, from their own houses, set out flat in the fields, with rows of Lombardy poplars along the road in front. Most of the women drove by. Not many of them stopped to visit with Averil Faraday.

Neighbours were not lacking, though none lived actually near. Three-quarters of a mile away, toward the old Indian Trail bridge, were the Hunts—Libbie and her two children, and her husband Benjamin, when he chose to be there. Beyond the bridge lived Alexander McLean, a bachelor and an intimate friend of the Faradays. Alexander, a broad-shouldered fellow of Scottish descent, had thick light brown hair with a tinge of the sandy in it, and eyes that were either blue or grey. Most people did not notice that his eyes could be hard or sad or restless, because he was always laughing. People laughed with him, and did not look at his eyes.

* * * * *

One Saturday morning in June, Hubert had a birthday. He was twelve.

"You'll have to grow faster," said his mother with a smile, as she gave him his present. It was a base-ball mitt, which he had long coveted. His father's present

had been a silver dollar. Hubert held it in his hand as he took the base-ball mitt. He did not like to be told that he was too small for his age, but he could not feel hurt at what his mother said, because underneath there was always something wistful which he felt, but was too ignorant to define. "You'll have to hurry up and get a start," she repeated.

"I know it!" he said, gulping. "Don't I eat enough?"

"Oh, yes, you eat enough." Averil was standing in the doorway, looking out at the lake. She wore a pink-checked gingham dress, open at the neck. Hubert, glancing up at her, perceived vaguely that she did not look old; even that she looked surprisingly young. One's mother was supposed to be old. He could not bother to think about the problem. "I think that when you do start to grow, you'll be a big man, Bertie," she said.

Bertie! Hubert detested the name. At school the other boys called out to him on the sly, "Bertie, Bertie, fat and dirty."

He knew that he was neither fat nor dirty, and that the boys had just put the words together because they "went"; but he hated the name no less. He retaliated as best he could with "Howard, Howard, he's a coward," and "Billy, Billy, ain't he silly?" But his efforts did not seem to carry the significance of the rhyme which was directed at him.

"I don't like to be called Bertie," he had said once or twice of late, to his mother.

"Why?" she had asked.

"I don't know," he had replied evasively. This morning he did not feel that he could protest, because his mother had been so nice about giving him the present;

and she was going to make cocoanut pie for dinner, especially for him. Besides, school would soon be out, and he was not likely to be badgered much by the other boys till fall. He shifted the dollar in his sweaty hand, and looked out across the lake as his mother was doing.

There had been rain the night before, and the air was humid; but the wind was cool. The leaves, turning up their edges, shone like glass. The house faced the west, and the sun was not yet high; so that the long shadows of the grove lay on the surface of the lake, richly blue, with tiny fluted ripples, flecked with white. Along the edge grew purple irises, and in the yard were loose-limbed acacias, heavy with their scented white racemes. They made a kind of frame for the blueness of the lake and the sky.

"What a lovely morning," said Mrs. Faraday. She sighed. "I must wash my dishes."

"Come out on the lake a little while, ma," begged Hubert.

"No, I must wash my dishes," his mother answered.

"Why?" queried Hubert, frowning. Dishes seemed to him of infinitesimal importance. It was a glorious morning to go on the lake.

Averil Faraday glanced down at him, a flicker of a smile on her lips. "I suppose because I'm a woman," she said. "Don't women always wash their dishes, even if they want to go on the lake?"

"I s'pose they do," muttered Hubert. Hidden in his mother's tone was something which made him feel uncomfortable.

"And if they *do* go on the lake when they ought to be washing their dishes—they're sorry," she said; "they're sorry." She was not smiling now. There was

a pause. Presently she turned back through the entry-way, to the dining-room at the back of the upright part of the house. "Put your presents away, dear, and go and weed a little in the lettuce bed." She spoke briskly, as if to put out of their minds what she had said. "The rain will bring up the weeds by the million."

"Can I take off my shoes 'n' stockings?" asked Hubert eagerly.

"Why, I don't care. It doesn't hurt," she answered. "You're getting to be a pretty big boy to go barefooted—but I guess it's all right when you're around the place."

"I thought you said I wasn't very big," returned Hubert slyly, looking over his shoulder. He had sat down on the step of the dining-room door, to unfasten his shoes.

"Well, maybe I meant you're too old to go barefooted."

"I wish I'd never get too old for that."

The boy was peeling off his long ribbed black stockings. He looked down at his white legs. "I guess I'll put on my overalls," he said. So much white leg showing seemed somehow indecent. When he got them good and brown—— "But how'll I get 'em brown if I wear overalls?" he mumbled. "Guess I'll wear 'em to-day, anyhow." He went upstairs and changed, and then ran out into the garden, along the path bordered with currant bushes, and rhubarb flaunting huge crumpled leaves on rose-coloured stalks.

The lettuce was thickly grown along the rows, and weeds had made good progress between. Hubert let his toes dig down into the damp earth, still pleasantly cool after the rain. He tugged away at the weeds. He was not thinking of much; or rather his mind was a confusion of what he would do with the silver dollar, and how

he wished his mother would call him Bert, as his father did, and what there was to be for dinner. Lower down, there were vague motions of mind—how nice his mother had looked in the pink dress, and how good his father had been lately, and whether Uncle Alec (Mr. Alexander McLean) would give him anything for his birthday. Sometimes he did, and sometimes he didn't. That was the queer thing about it. When he did, it was something splendid, that almost made you hold your breath.

For what seemed to Hubert a long time, he kept on weeding the lettuce, stopping now and then to look around. The place was silent, except for the twittering of birds and the cackling of hens. Willard Faraday was down in the last of his fields, on the other side of the road, mending fences. A faint tapping of a hammer gave a hint of his existence. Hubert was too far away from the house to catch the sound of his mother's work; she was always quiet at her tasks.

The boy came to the end of a row, and stood up to ease his back. The silence was broken by a step on the pebbly place where the road ran along the end of the lake. It was not the noise of a team. Hubert craned his neck, to look past the snowball bushes and apple trees. He saw a man's hat of soft grey felt, moving behind the shrubbery. His heart leaped. Uncle Alec! "Bet you he's bringing a present."

He stood staring, speculating. His first impulse was to run to the house, to see what Mr. McLean had brought; but he thought better of that. It might look as if he *expected* something. And then, too, his mother had given him quite clearly to understand that one must not burst in suddenly and unasked when people were calling—even friends like Uncle Alec. She had been

cross with him at times, when he had not waited to be called. So he crouched at the lettuce rows again. He heard the sound of footsteps, and then they died away on the grass.

Nobody called him, and after a while he saw Uncle Alec going away again. He walked slowly, with his head down, as if he were thinking. "I got to have a drink of water," said Bert, aloud. He took off his hat, to let the wind blow across his forehead. He went up the walk quietly, in his bare feet. They made no sound on the step. He halted in the flood of sunshine just beyond the trellised Rambler rose. The screen door had been left wide open, flung back against the trellis by an unheeding hand. Averil Faraday was lying half across the table with the blue-checked cloth. Her arms were stretched out, and her fingers were clenched so hard that her hands seemed stiff, like wood. Her face was hidden on her arms, and only her black braids showed, and the white skin at the back of her neck, above the collar of her gingham dress. She was almost still, but a faint shivering ran through her body.

Bert stood motionless. At first he was going to run to her, and ask what was the matter. But already he had learned not to give rein to his impulses, where his mother was concerned. He stood staring, and shuffling soundlessly, but his mother did not move nor look up. He turned and went down the steps, and out into the garden again. He forgot about the drink of water for a while. Then he thought of it, and went back. This time he went in through the shed, and pumped a pailful of water very loudly before he ventured into the summer kitchen for a cup. He liked a glass from the dining-room cupboard, but he decided that a cup would do.

When he took it back, his mother came to the dining-room door. "Well, Bertie," she said cheerfully, "how did you get along with the weeding?" She was smiling now, though Bert thought that she looked queer.

"Pretty good," he said. "Uncle Alec was here, wasn't he? I saw him."

"Yes. And what do you think?" Mrs. Faraday had a sprightly air. "He brought a present for you. That's why he didn't stay. He thought it would be more of a surprise if he didn't give it to you himself."

"What is it?" The boy was all agog with eagerness.

"It's here—a package. I haven't opened it, of course."

The boy took the parcel in his hands. It was in the shape of two boxes, tied together under a wrapping paper. He pulled at the string, broke it, and tore off the wrappings. Sure enough, here were two boxes, one long, and one square. Neither was very large. "Oh, what do you s'pose it is?" he mumbled, as he tried awkwardly to open the smaller box. His mother took the other one from him, so that he might open the smaller first. The cover came off—and there, on blue cotton, lay a silver watch. Its white face stared up familiarly, and the little black second-hand was going round and round in a hurry, with a friendly *tick*. "Oh, oh!" Hubert was too much delighted to speak. "A watch, a watch, a watch," he cried at last. He took it up in his fingers, and felt its smooth rim, and the pure glass of the crystal. It was a much finer watch than he knew. It was the sort of silver watch that a man would buy who wanted to get the most perfect gold, but did not dare. "It's a cracker-jack, ain't it?" said Hubert.

"It's splendid," agreed Mrs. Faraday, staring at her boy.

"It's awful good of him to give it to me." Hubert held the watch to his ear, or, really, he pressed it against his cheek, under the pretense of listening.

"He said that every boy should have a watch when he's twelve years old," Mrs. Faraday remarked, after a pause.

"You bet he ought to," grinned the lad.

He had forgotten about the other parcel. "Better open this one, too," said his mother.

"You hold this, then." He gave the watch into her curiously reluctant palm. The other box contained an electric flash-light, the first that the boy had ever seen. "Golly! Ain't it a funny thing?" he said breathlessly, when its purpose had been made clear. "You don't have to have a lantern, ner anything.

"No. When you have to shut the window in the night, when it rains, you can go right over to it, without falling under the table," his mother laughed; "and when you're hunting for eggs in the dark places in the barn, you can use it, too; and when you forget to bring in the wood, in the winter, until after dark. You mustn't wear it out by putting it off and on, but keep it till you need it. You'll use the current up too much, Uncle Alec said, if you aren't careful."

"Golly," the boy repeated, out of the paucity of his vocabulary. He was overwhelmed with his good fortune. Two such presents in one day, not to mention the silver dollar and the base-ball mitt. He hardly knew what to say or think.

"I must get on with my work," said Averil. "I'll put the watch away in the dining-room." She set about her tasks in the old dark-walled kitchen, which was a store-room in the winter. Its windows looked out upon the

trunks of the hemlock trees and the clustered stems of the high bushed cranberries. It was a cool place in the summer, but shadowed, not an exhilarating room for a woman to spend her time in, at the round of woman's work.

Hubert stood a long time at the dining-room table, handling his wonderful new possessions. At last he laid them aside, and went down to wade in the lake, and fish for clams in the marl. It was fun to see them spurt out a stream of water from their shells, as they closed the doors against the enemy. Hubert put the clams carefully into the water, after they had shut themselves in. He was not given to destruction, and could not bear to kill anything.

* * * * *

Willard Faraday came home from his work in the field, humming and swinging his hammer. It was the most flawless of June days, a day to be happy in, and forget trouble. The dinner was on the table—the farmer's hearty meal. Mrs. Faraday was a good cook. On the cheap oak sideboard (Willard had bought it from some people who were moving away) there was a cocoanut custard pie, with a dewy meringue at the top: a birthday treat for the boy arrived at youth's estate.

"Well!" Willard threw down his hat and his hammer on the seat of the rocking chair, and went into the kitchen to wash his hands. "It smells fine. I'm hungry as a hero. Long time since breakfast." He was rubbing his hands with the towel. He hung it on the wooden peg, and turned toward the dining-room. Hubert came toward his father with his two new presents in his hands.

"See, pa, what I got," he exulted, displaying the gifts. "See what I got."

Faraday stopped and stared. His eyes narrowed. "Where'd you get those?" he asked. His hands were hanging at his sides, and his fingers worked convulsively.

"Uncle Alec gave 'em to me—he left 'em here for me. I was weeding in the garden. See—a watch, and one of these here things that flash a light." The boy snapped on the glow of the electric flash, which showed sickly yellow in the sun.

Willard, ominously silent, took a step forward into the room. He stretched his hand for the watch. Hubert gave it hesitatingly. His fingers fumbled on the smooth rim, the fluted knob at the stem. Willard stood looking at it for a long time. He turned it over and turned it back. "A damned fine watch," he said at last. He turned upon his wife. She was standing behind him, her eyes wide, her face tense. "So Alec was here this morning, was he?" the man asked, in a studiedly casual tone.

"Yes. Just a minute," she said hurriedly. "He came to bring Bertie his things."

"His birthday presents," the man corrected her. "He called you in, of course, Bert, to get your birthday presents."

"No, I was working out in the lettuce bed," Hubert hastened to say. He looked alarmed, but still proud and happy.

"Oh, he didn't ask you to come in?"

"Come, let's have dinner," said Averil, with an attempt at carrying off the situation. "It'll get cold."

"There's cocoanut pie," cried Bert, willing now to distract his father's attention. "Come on."

"A damned fine watch," said Willard Faraday, gazing down at the timepiece in his hand. His face was distorted, and his whole body quivered. "Such a good watch that it ought to be put where nothing can happen to it." He walked toward the entry which led to the front door.

Mrs. Faraday gasped. "What are you going to do?" she asked breathlessly. She clutched at the door jamb as she followed him.

"Put it where nothing can happen to it." Faraday opened the door to the entry, and walked toward the front door.

"Oh, pa, what are you doing?" quavered Bert, running behind. Faraday, without a glance at the boy, stood on the threshold and raised his arm. "Oh, pa, my watch, my watch!" screamed the lad, reaching futile hands for his treasure. "Oh, pa, please——"

With a strong downward skimming motion, Faraday had thrown the watch far out over the water. It glittered, cast up sparkles, disappeared. Hubert shrieked as it went down.

"Where's that other thing?" Faraday turned back. His hard narrowed eyes ignored both wife and child.

"You shan't, you shan't!" Hubert was sobbing, and tears were flowing down his cheeks. "Don't let him, ma, don't let him." Averil shrank from the man as he went past her. She did not speak. A sick look of terror and despair were on her face. Hubert dashed into the dining-room, snatched his flash-light, and threw himself on the old sofa, face down, the flash under him. "You shan't, you shan't," he was screaming. His little bare feet were beating the floor. Willard strode over to him, and seized him by the arm.

"Stop, Willard, stop!" Averil's voice was high with fear. "Don't you do that. Whatever you think, it isn't fair for you to hurt the boy. It isn't fair, it isn't fair," she repeated passionately, pushing him away.

The man stood facing her, his mouth working, without speech. He let go his hold upon the boy. The hammer lay where he had laid it, upon the seat of the rocking chair. He stepped forward and grasped it. For a moment the woman was frozen with horror, but when she saw what he was going to do, she kept quiet, contemptuously. The hammer came down on the table, with its neat array of crockery and glass. Again and again he struck, smashing the big platter, the tureen, the tumblers full of water, the tea cups, the brown tea pot full of hot tea, the bread plate, the butter dish, the pile of smaller plates set aside for the dessert, the favourite flowered plate holding the little boy's birthday treat.

Silenced, the lad on the sofa raised his head and stared, cowering and blanching. The last stroke completed the devastation. Willard, white as a dead man, cast the hammer on the floor and fled, leaving the screen door wide open, as another man had left it that day. The woman and the boy heard him crunching the gravel in the path which led to the barn. Then they heard him shouting at the horses as he hitched them to the light buggy. Hubert had resumed his sobbing, and his mother knelt with her arm around him. They did not speak until they saw the buggy lunging past the house, and down the lane to the road. The furious screeching of the wheels mingled with the cracking of the whip and the muttering and swearing of the driver.

Now Hubert cried, heartbroken for his watch, the beautiful lost treasure. "Oh, mama, why did he do it?"

he stammered, sinking against his mother's breast. "Why did he throw it away?"

Averil Faraday, her tearless eyes hidden against his hair, could only murmur, "I'm so sorry, so sorry. My poor little boy!"

* * * * *

Late that night, Averil Faraday, lying awake in her room at the front of the house, heard Willard come driving into the yard. The wheels made a slow scraping on the pebbles, and the horses' hoofs sank almost without noise into the sand and grass. After a while, she heard the man come in through the shed, and she detected the subdued thud of parcels being put down on the dining-room table, now clear of the havoc of noon-time, and placidly covered with its checked blue cloth. Heavy, yet restrained, footsteps mounted the stairs, and entered the room across the narrow hall. Muffled movements followed, then the creaking of the bed. There was not to be much sleeping in the house that night. Even Hubert had had another fit of weeping at bed time, and had slept only uneasily, with starts and cries. Averil had gone twice to his room to comfort him.

Now she lay with her arm across her eyes, to shut out even the faint light of the moon reflected from the lake. She heard the wind swishing in the sedges along the shore, and the lapping of the waves against the little space of sand where the boat was drawn up, and where Bertie played at digging trenches and catching clams. Her mind was almost torpid. What was the use of thinking? She had thought and thought until she seemed incapable of further effort. The only thing that stirred her to emotion was the remembered voice of the boy, as

he had asked her, with sobbing, "Why, why, mother? Why, why?" She writhed, burying her face and its protecting arm deep in the pillow.

* * * * *

The next morning, Faraday was up early, and out looking after the stock. Averil rose and dressed and went downstairs. Upon the table in the dining-room lay several large parcels, which rattled when she touched them. They contained dishes, pretty ones, she noted as she took off their wrappings; better dishes than those which had been broken. She sighed, caressing the blue spray across the plates. She had said more than once that she liked dishes with blue figures on them, pale and scattered figures, not heavy and coarse. It was strange that Willard had remembered. She hurried to wash them and put them away, that nothing need be said. Willard had built the fire in the stove, and Averil set about her share of the morning's tasks. Breakfast was ready, and the dishes and their wrappings had disappeared, when Willard came in. Averil had set the table with crockery from the cupboard, the plain white ironstone which was used "for common." Willard was haggard, and he did not speak, as he washed his hands and dried them. Yet his silence was not that of fury, but of shame. His anger was so mad, so raging, while it lasted, and then it died out into the bitterest self-condemnation and abasement. Averil had seen it all before. Every time, it had seemed as if she could never feel anything but contempt for him again; and then she could not stifle her pity, not for his wrath, but for his humiliation.

At breakfast they could not look at each other, but they tried to talk—about the corn in the far field, and

the prospects for a good fruit year, and the weasel that was carrying off the young chicks. Willard, in his soiled blue chambray shirt, and with his hair in disorder, was not a pleasing object of contemplation. He was not a drinking man, and he had not now been drinking, but his hand shook as he reached for his coffee cup. His dark eyes, lowered to his plate, were full of misery. Averil, with sorrow and compassion in her heart, kept her face expressionless, as she had trained herself to do, during the last twelve years.

They were both glad, but a trifle shaken, when Hubert came down, earlier than usual, his hair rumped, one cheek reddened with long pressure of the pillow. He looked uncertainly from one to the other of the older people, as if surprised to see them eating together with such outward amiability. "Hello, Bert," his father greeted him. "Up early this morning, ain't you?"

"Uh-huh." The boy pattered to the kitchen to wash his hands and face.

The eyes of Averil followed him anxiously. "All right?" she said, as he sat down. "Here's your coffee, and there's lots of cream. That old weasel got another of Blackie's chickens last night."

"Oh, how mean!" Hubert listened with interest to conjectures about the ways of the sly weasel. Averil's tense muscles relaxed. Relations had been re-established, and things could go on as before.

CHAPTER II

BEYOND the end of the lake, at some distance toward the Indian Trail bridge, lived Elizabeth Hunt and her children. She was known in the neighbourhood as Libbie Hunt, or sometimes Poor Libbie Hunt. She was poor enough, as far as the world's goods went, though not by any means an object of charity; but the epithet was not occasioned by her poverty. It was meant to suggest the pity logically accruing to her because of the behaviour of an elusive husband. Benjamin Hunt was given to long absences from home, when nobody knew where he was, and when for months at a time he was almost, if not quite, forgotten—by everyone except his wife, Elizabeth, and who knows how nearly by her?

The house was a story and a half high, a cottage unintentionally pretty, with latticed porches and wild grape vines, and small-paned windows. There were old lilac bushes along the side, and an orchard of apple trees at the back, where a brook ran through a marshy meadow.

Libbie Hunt was stout, with a pink, good-natured face which ought to have pleased anyone, except perhaps the questing Benjamin. Libbie's daughter Caddie, short for Carraline, was thirteen now, a scrawny little thing, with a surprisingly lovely curl of brown hair hanging between her shoulders. Caddie would never be good looking, her mother said philosophically, but she

might get so that she'd pass in a crowd, if she'd only put on some flesh, like the other members of the family. Caddie only grinned, whether because she had no fear of staying plain, or because she suspected that putting on flesh might not add to her beauty, is not exactly clear. The other member of the family who had solidity enough to be boasted of was the baby brother, now three, a roly-poly bursting with smiles, and concerned not at all as to the whereabouts of a father.

Libbie Hunt tried to run the farm herself, or such part of it as she did not let out "on the shares." She could do almost any sort of man's work, and a woman's as well; but it came hard on her, as she said, to do both.

On this morning in June, Caddie was getting ready for school, and packing her basket with lunch. The district school was not quite finished, for it had begun late in the fall, so that the children might have an opportunity to help with the potato-picking and corn-husking.

"I hate to go, mother," Caddie was saying, "and leave you with all the work. I could do an awful lot, if you'd let me stay."

"I know you could, Lady Bird," said Mrs. Hunt, briskly scouring a frying pan. "But you know I want you to get so that you know a little something. Your father wants you to know more than just housework: how to read, and understand the things he likes." Libbie Hunt lowered her face over her dishes. She seldom spoke of Mr. Hunt, but when she did, it was with respect for his education, which was greater than hers, and for his opinion on matters of learning.

"Well, I don't think it makes so much difference what

father wants," Caddie burst out, slapping butter on her bread with a vindictive gesture. "If he wants me to know anything, why doesn't he stay here, and help me learn, or do something for some of us, anyhow?" She had caught the family habit of seldom referring to the absent father, but now that the reference had been made, she was willing to say what she thought.

"Hush," said Libbie, turning to look over her shoulder, with an uncommonly grave face. "Your father has his own reasons. He can't stand this kind of life. He's different," she finished lamely.

"Different!" Caddie stamped on the oilcloth of the kitchen floor, with her cheap and clumsy little shoe. "I should think——"

"That's enough," cried Elizabeth Hunt. She was good-natured and easy-going, but on one thing she was firm: she never allowed anybody to say anything slighting of Benjamin. What she thought, herself, no one knew.

Caddie gave the long aggressive sigh of the repressed. After a pause, she said, "I'll come home just as soon as I can."

"Don't hurry," answered the mother. "I know you like to stay and read the books, and talk with the teacher."

"Well, I'll see," said Caddie. She did dearly love to linger after school, erasing the black-boards for the teacher, and peeping into the library books, few enough at the best, and familiar with much re-reading. "If I could take Brother-Boy along, it would help you a little. Next year he'll be going."

"He's company. I wouldn't let him go for anything," said Mrs. Hunt hastily. The child, John Benjamin, called John-Benjy and Brother-Boy, was named after

her father and her husband, both of whom she had reason to ignore. "Now, run along, or you'll be late. Don't walk alone—walk with Jensens. They'll be here in a minute. Don't walk alone, Caddie."

"I don't see why," objected the girl. "It doesn't hurt." Her father had scrupulously taught her to say *doesn't*, instead of *don't*, in the right places. "I'd a lot rather go by myself. Ellen Jensen is always talking about how much land her father has, and she says *yump* and *yob* and *yelly*, when she isn't in school."

"Do as I say," admonished Libbie Hunt. "Don't go around alone." She knew why young girls should not walk out on wooded country roads alone, but she did not want to tell Caddie. "There! I see the Jensen girls. They're waving from the corner."

Caddie ran out to kiss Brother-Boy, who was making a house out of chips, at the back door. She snatched her basket, and gave her mother a kiss, its fervour moderated by impatience. "Well, I'm gone," she said. "Good-bye."

"Good-bye." Mrs. Hunt went on with her labours, making the house clean, kneading the bread, looking after the child. Caddie had made the beds and tidied the bed-rooms, before she went. Morning always brought a long day's work to the hands of Libbie Hunt. She made butter, and raised poultry, and kept a large garden, in which she nurtured vegetables and fruit for both summer and winter use. Sometimes she could sell a little at the village store, and get money to buy the clothing which she and the children must have. During the greater part of the year, the family lived literally on the fruit of her toil, and almost nothing except the necessary simple groceries came from outside the farm.

She had just finished cleaning the bread-board, when

she heard a vehicle drive into the yard. Brother-Boy was eating his forenoon's snack on the back porch. "Now, who is that?" said Mrs. Hunt aloud. She had acquired the habit of talking to herself, as most people do who are much alone. Hastily wiping her hands, she ran to the screen door, at the same time that Alexander McLean came up on the steps. He was ruffling John-Benjoy's curls with a friendly hand, and John-Benjoy was looking up at him delightedly.

"Good morning, Mrs. Hunt," said McLean. He never called her *Libbie*, as the other neighbours did. "I thought I'd stop in and see about the hay in the meadow."

Mrs. Hunt, her hand on the door, smiled at the man standing with his hat off, under the grape vine which ran over the porch. His heavy yet not corpulent form, his strong shoulders and neck, gave him an appearance of great force. His face was not handsome, perhaps, but it was pleasing and well drawn. His eyes were grey-blue, his hair neither light nor dark, a golden brown, not yet thinning. His teeth were good. He laughed a great deal. There was something about him which suggested the sailor or the woodsman, more than the farmer. A thoughtful person would have said that, if there had not been something to keep him in one place, he would have been a rover, an explorer, a conquistador. The neighbours were not thoughtful people, yet they said almost that very thing.

Libbie Hunt liked Alexander McLean. He was kind to her, and helped her a good deal in running the farm. He gave her advice about fertilizers and the rotation of crops. He assisted her in securing renters or tenants. And he looked out to see that tasks were done which she with all her energy could hardly do for herself. The hay

in the meadow beyond the house was one of his special concerns.

"It ain't quite time to cut it yet, do you think?" asked Libbie.

"I don't think so. It's early yet; but I'll take a look and see how soon I ought to get at it," answered McLean. "You ought to get two good crops out of it."

"Won't you come in?" Tardily polite, Mrs. Hunt swung back the screen door. Her tardiness was not for want of welcome, but for shyness. He knew and she knew that a man must not come to the house too often, to see a woman whose husband is away. He had not always been careful enough in that respect. So Libbie Hunt merely asked him to enter, in the tentative way which signifies, "It's all right if you don't."

"No. I've got to be getting along. A farmer doesn't gain much by sitting around on summer mornings," McLean replied, with his cordial laugh. "I'm going to the village, to get some things that Gundersen forgot, last Saturday night. I thought about the grass, so I stopped. Well, John, how does it taste? Is it good jam?"

"Mmm," nodded John. He held out the slice of bread, bitten full of half-circular hollows, inviting his big friend to share the feast.

McLean laughed again. "No, not this time, Johnnie. You're a good boy, but you must eat your own bread and jam. He's a nice little fellow, Mrs. Hunt."

Libbie's eyes rested on the round shining head of the little boy. "Yes, he's my little man," she said. "I'd be good and lonesome without him sometimes." Her eyes suddenly filled with tears, she hardly knew why. Perhaps it was seeing this big dependable man standing

there on her back porch, loving her child, when her own man, the father of the child, did not care enough to stay. She felt confused, that McLean should see her crying. She never complained to anyone, and least of all would she have relaxed her self-control before him.

He pretended not to see. "You have two fine youngsters," he said, stepping down toward the path. "I saw Caddie on her way to school."

"She don't want to go," answered Mrs. Hunt. Her husband's instructions concerning *doesn't* and *don't* had been lost upon her: she had usually been cooking or sewing or scrubbing when he corrected her. "She thinks she could help me so much."

"School will soon be out," said McLean. "She can help you all summer. But in the fall she must go again. It's little enough one gets here."

"Yes, that's what I tell her," assented Mrs. Hunt eagerly. "She won't die of what she gets here in the country. She has one more year before she finishes the country school."

"Well, she must go that long, anyhow," said McLean. "Time enough to think, after that." He was on the ground now, ready to go.

"One hardly knows what to do about one's children, here in the country," Mrs. Hunt remarked.

"That's true," the man answered quickly. There was a moment of embarrassment between them. "One hardly knows," he went on more composedly, "whether to let them get what they can here, and let 'em be plain farmers, who don't need to know much; or whether to try to send 'em away to school, and run the risk of them not amounting to anything, either in town or in the country." He spoke with a slight occasional accent or

idiom which suggested Scotland, though he had been born in the United States.

"That's what I mean," said Mrs. Hunt. "I don't see how I can send Caddie away, so I guess she'll have to be satisfied with what she can get out of her books, and marry a farmer and settle down, without knowing very much."

McLean let his eyes search the horizon. "It would be great to get away," he said. "I think sometimes it's kinder to let 'em go, no matter what happens to 'em." He spoke as if the thought which he had put upon the matter was somewhat more than was necessary for a bachelor without children.

"A man can go," said Mrs. Hunt with mild bitterness. Again she wondered what ailed her. She never said things like that.

McLean flushed. When he had spoken, he had forgotten the absent Benjamin. "Not always," he said. "Well, good day, Mrs. Hunt. I'll just step down and take a look at the grass, and then I'll be getting on." He laid a caressing hand on the head of Brother-Boy.

"Good day." Libbie watched him as he walked through the thick grass of the orchard; then she turned back into the house. As she went about her work, she thought of Alexander McLean. He had a good house, too large for him, so that half of it was closed. An old Danish woman kept house for him, in her clean but foreign way. Sometimes he had had to fend for himself; but since he had found Mrs. Gundersen, he had fared better. It was queer that he stayed, thought Libbie Hunt. He really wasn't cut out for a farmer, though he prospered well enough, with his Scotch shrewdness, and his easy way of not seeming to do much, yet getting everything done.

He had the faculty, not explicable to the casual, of finding hired men when there were apparently none to be found, and of keeping them contented when other people couldn't hold them for love or money.

People liked him and called him Alec, and yet they made conjectures about him, and talked about him behind his back. As for Libbie, she paid no heed, so she told herself, to the rumours which went round concerning him. They had cropped up and died out, and cropped up again more times than she could remember during the last twelve or thirteen years. He had been on his place when she came, and she recalled the first time that she had seen him. The bride of Benjamin, who had not yet succumbed to his passion for roving, she was riding with her husband near the Indian Trail bridge, and they had met a young man leading a big black horse, taking it perhaps to a more distant pasture. The man walked with his hand on the horse's neck. His brown hair, worn longer then than now, was tossed by the wind. His cheeks were smooth and red. The swing of his walk suggested the woodsman or the mountaineer. He was young then, not more than twenty-four. He had been something of a sensation in the countryside, and most of the girls, now married women with increasing families, had looked at him boldly or shyly, with invitation in their eyes. He had somehow withstood them all. It would have been better, Libbie reflected, if he had taken one of them—it did not matter much which—and married her and lived in companionship and had a family of his own. That, or the wandering life for which he had confessed a longing, would have been the thing for him; not the anomalous half-life which he was living, against his nature and against his judgment.

"It's strange, what traps people get caught in," said Libbie, aloud, as she took down her sunbonnet, to go out to her weeding. "'Traps,' that's the right word. They're shut and locked, and there don't seem to be any key." She stopped to wash John-Benjy's face, and then took the little lad with her to the cabbage rows, and let him make haycocks of the weeds which she pulled from the teeming earth.

* * * * *

Hubert had not gone to school that day. He had been nervous and fretful on Sunday, and his father had had to coax and cajole before the boy would go near him or have much to do with him. They did not go to church at the village—neither Willard nor Averil could make the effort; and so Willard had had time to make willow whistles for Bert, and give him a ride on the mare, and take him out on the lake in the boat, skimming along the shore, at the farthest possible distance from the spot where the watch had disappeared. Hubert had lapsed into acquiescence, but he made Willard uncomfortable by staring at him steadily and speculatively, without speech.

On Monday, Hubert shrank from going to school. "It's silly," Averil scolded, with simulated scorn. "There's only a few days more, anyhow, and you don't want to go. You aren't sick, and what excuse can you have?" She concealed her pity for the nervous lad.

"The boys call me Bertie," said Hubert. "And I wanted to show them my watch." His mouth quivered. It was the first time that he had mentioned the watch since Saturday night.

Averil winced. "But there's the flash," she said. "The boys will think that's fine."

Bert shook his head. "They'd want to keep turning it on and off, and they'd get it so it wouldn't work," he demurred. "And anyway, it ain't like a watch."

Averil went back to her work without speaking; then she said, "Well, all right. Stay at home this morning, if you want to, but you'll have to stay outdoors and keep busy. I can't have you sitting round the house, looking glum."

Hubert was out at the pebbly place at the end of the lake, hunting for pollywogs, when Alexander McLean came along on his way to the village. McLean pulled up his horses with a start when he saw the boy in his rolled-up overalls, bending down over the water. "How's this?" he called, not without sharpness. "No school to-day, Bert?"

Bert looked up, startled. His eyes met those of the man. "I—I didn't want to go," he faltered, the colour rising in his cheeks. He didn't know what to say to Uncle Alec about the watch. He waded out to the grassy bank, while Alexander twisted the reins about the whip, and got out of his buckboard.

"What's the matter?" asked the man, a line coming between his eyes. "You aren't sick, are you, lad?"

Hubert shook his head. "No. But mama said I could stay out this morning. I didn't want to go."

"Why?"

Hubert dug with his bare toe into the grass roots. He looked down at his glass jar of muddy water in which three lumpy tadpoles were swimming. "I don't know. I didn't want to." His throat swelled, and his shoulders shivered.

Alexander stood looking down at him silently. There was suffering in his face. At last he said, "Did you get the watch I left for you on Saturday?"

Hubert nodded, with his eyes still on the tadpoles.

"Did you like it?" asked McLean gently.

Hubert nodded again. The magnificence of the watch rose before him—its excellent shining case, its white face, its swiftly moving second-hand, that went faster than your heart could beat. His lips shook.

Alexander laid his hand on the boy's shoulder. "Tell me what's the matter," he said. The kindness in his voice could not be withstood.

The child broke into sobs. Alec, crouching on the ground, put his arm around him. "Tell me," he said with tender fierceness, "has anyone been mean to you? Has anybody hurt you?"

Bert, his forehead on the man's shoulder, could only stammer and gasp. "He took my watch—he took it away from me. *He threw it into the lake.*" A nervous tremor tore him.

McLean started, and went red. He bit his lip, and his brow darkened. "He threw it away—into the lake?" he repeated, almost stupidly. "What did he do that for?"

Hubert was sobbing now, in earnest, as a little boy cries who has been shocked and hurt by inexplicable grown-up behaviour. "I don't know," he answered. He was fumbling for a non-existent handkerchief. McLean pulled a fresh white square from his pocket and wiped the boy's eyes. "I was just showing it to him, when he came in from the field, and he took it in his hand, and he says, 'This is a damn' fine watch,' he says—'It ought to be put away,' or somethin', he says,—I don't remem-

ber what—an' then he went to the front door, and he threw it—he threw it, as far as he could throw. It splashed hard, and went down in the water, just where it's deepest—you know, the blue place——” The boy stopped, rent by sobs, in the recounting of his tragedy.

“Oh, lad! I'm sorry, now,” said McLean. “And didn't he say why he did it?”

The boy shook his head, still gulping. “No. Mama asked him, but he didn't say. I wouldn't let him have the flash-light, though,” he went on with feeble triumph. “I put it under my stomach, and laid down on the lounge; and mama pulled him away.”

“Was that all?” asked McLean tensely. He looked across at the house, as if he could visualize the scene.

“No.” Hubert sobbed afresh. “He took the hammer—he'd been mending the fences—and he took the hammer, and broke the dishes. We was just goin' to have dinner, and there was cocoanut pie.”

“My God!” McLean gave a groaning snort of laughter. “Broke the dishes! Cocoanut pie! God, what a scene!” He kept on laughing, so that Hubert raised his eyes and stared. But Uncle Alec's face did not look as if he were laughing. It looked as if he had burnt himself, or caught his hand in the door. Hubert culled these notions from his own remembrance of pain.

Alexander rose from his crouching position, and stood with the boy's form pressed against him. Then he sat down on a boulder, still holding the child by the arm. “I must be getting along,” he said. “But now I want to tell you something, Bert. It was hard lines to lose the watch, but there are other watches in the world. I want you to be a man now. You're twelve years old. You're too old to cry. Whatever happens to you, don't cry.

Stand up and take it. Don't *cry!*" He shook the boy, without roughness. "Do you hear? No whining from now on." The boy was shamefaced, roused from self-pity. "Tell your mother I know," Alex continued, as he turned to go. Hubert nodded. "Not anyone else." It was not likely, Bert thought, that he should speak to his father about what Uncle Alec had said. He was ashamed that Uncle Alec should think him a baby. It was silly to cry, but he had not seemed able to help it. "Go to school this afternoon," was McLean's last admonition.

He drove away, the seat of the buckboard sagging with his weight. He scowled, and he did not look back at the boy. He was muttering, but Hubert could not understand his words. They sounded like either swearing or praying. Hubert did not feel interested in the tadpoles after that. He emptied the jar into the water, and went slowly home, around the end of the lake and up the lane, where the acacia boughs were bending, and bees were sucking the nectar from white clusters of bloom.

Averil was sweeping, and she had a kitchen towel around her head. Under it her eyes looked heavy and dark. "I saw Uncle Alec," said Bert, leaning in at the door post. "He came along when I was hunting pollywogs."

Averil's broom hesitated, but went on. "Did you?" she said dully. "What did he have to say?"

"He asked me about the watch," Bert replied.

"Did you tell him?"

"Yes. I told him it was in the lake—and about pa's breaking the dishes."

"What did he say?" Averil did not look up.

"He laughed," said Hubert.

"*Laughed?*" queried Averil, drawing in her breath.

"Well, it sounded as if he was laughing, but when I looked at him, he didn't seem to be," Bert went on. "He said 'Cocoanut pie! My God!'"

Averil's lips twitched. "I suppose it is funny," she said; "or it would be to some people. Maybe even to Alec."

"It didn't sound just like swearing," Bert remarked. Then he added, "Uncle Alec made me promise I'd go to school this afternoon."

"He has some sense," retorted Averil. "I should have made you go this morning."

"Then I wouldn't have seen Uncle Alec," Hubert made reply. He had a misty feeling that his encounter with Uncle Alec had been important.

"No. Well, you would have seen him some time. But I'm glad he knows about the watch."

"Will he be mad at pa, do you think?" asked the boy.

Averil considered while she went for the dust pan. "No, I guess not," she said. "If he wanted to be mad, he'd have been mad long ago. It isn't any use; and, Bertie, you know your father is awfully sorry about what he did. I wouldn't say anything to him about it, if I were you."

"Naw, I sh'd think not. Say, ma, don't you think I'd better have an awful early dinner, so's I can be sure to get to school on time?"

"Why, yes, I think you ought." Averil glanced at the clock. "I'll get you something in a little while. It's too early yet. Maybe you'd like to go out and get the eggs."

Hubert went out to the big shadowy barn, where the

dust motes rode the sunbeams coming down through rifts in the shingles. It always seemed mysterious in there. The woods were not far behind it, and there were sounds from the trees and bushes, crackling and sighing, the kind of sounds which cannot be accounted for. As Bert stepped inside, a sudden rapping pealed upon the roof. He gave a great start, and looked up. The rapping came again, and he knew it was merely the noise of a woodpecker on the ridgepole. He hunted for the eggs, and found seven, flesh-white and warm, hidden in hollows in the mow. He carried them to an old tin basin which had been used for watering the little chicks. Then he sat down in the doorway of the barn, in the sun. He did not think, exactly, but he did what passes for thinking, in the mind of a boy. He could see the back of the house, white in the sun, with flecks of shade from the cherry trees, and darker patches from the hemlocks. And beyond, he could see the lake, all blue and silver. In his mind was a jumble of ideas—the watch, and how it lay in the marl, down under that shining surface; and Uncle Alec, and what he had said about crying and being a baby when anything happened that hurt you awfully, and taking things like a man. Until that time, Hubert had been, in spite of his approaching twelfth birthday, a small boy, somewhat younger than his age; but to-day, in the few minutes which he spent on the barn door-sill, he grew older by many months. He'd take things like a man, after this, he resolved, no matter what they were, nor how they hurt. He was sure that Uncle Alec had always taken things like a man. When he went into the house, he straightened his shoulders and tried to walk as if he were taller, as if he had a man's stature as well as a man's courage. He entered the house

with the eggs, in an exaltation of self-respect which gave him a new and actually an older look. His mother, frying bacon at the stove in the summer kitchen, gave him a glance of perplexity, but said nothing; and he strode on upstairs to get ready for school.

* * * * *

Willard Faraday, working in the far fields, alone with himself, hoed his early corn with mechanical motions, while his mind went on in its unceasing debate, its eternal questioning, accusing, excusing, repudiating, desiring, inquiring, condemning, and forgiving. Nobody knew the turmoil in which he lived. As he went about, tilling his fields, caring for his stock, planning his seed time, and gathering in his harvests, he was a figure which moved and spoke and acted; but his soul was a different world.

To-day shame was added to the suspicion and bitterness which were his daily companions. He was ashamed of his behaviour, ashamed of the humiliation which he had suffered before his child.

He went over endless rememberingings and conjectures. He wondered why Averil had married him at all. They had grown up together, back in western New York. He had always wanted her, always loved her, always been savagely, passionately bent on possessing her. She had taken him acquiescingly at the last, and he had been so carried away by the amazement and delight of her yielding, that for a long time it had not occurred to him to inquire too curiously into her reasons. He had taken it for granted that she loved him, else why should she marry him? In Willard Faraday's code, people married the people that they loved. Of course, he knew that Averil's mother had wanted Averil to marry him; but

he had not supposed that a girl could be over-persuaded into a marriage unless she actually, if secretly, wanted the man herself.

Averil had always been quiet, ever since she was a little thing, not given to outbursts or to demonstrations of affection. He had not expected too much of her. It had been all right, he told himself over and over, until they had come out here to the Middle West, where things had been different, and they had had to start in at making a place for themselves in a new neighbourhood. Only seldom did he say, out and out to himself, that things had been all right until they had found Alec McLean. To-day he admitted this much; but when he had said it, he checked himself, with a sharp pain somewhere in his body or mind, he did not know which, and asked whether, after all, it had been so right before they had met McLean. Had the difference made its beginning at that time, or had it not? Willard, bending over the corn, hoe in hand, peered into the shroudings of the past, to discern what had been there that he had not seen.

Little scenes, phrases, nothings almost, came up to confuse him, to fill him with doubt and distrust, and to throw his condemnation back upon himself. After all, if he had not been able to hold her, even from the first, he could not blame anyone else. And then the question came. Blame them for what? Averil was blameless, white, beyond the smirching of a grimy thought. Averil was his wife, the mother of his boy,—the mother—Willard Faraday dug his hoe so savagely into the earth that the young jade-green corn came up with it. He groaned, bending to replace the blades in the earth. On and on went the mechanical man, and on and on went

his hoe, and on and on the never-ceasing whirling chaos of his thoughts.

When he came to the end of the row next to the fence, he looked off toward the house, as he always did. But he could not see it, for it was hidden behind grassy stretches, and cherry trees, and acacias. He could see the chimney and a window or two, and the black hemlocks behind it; but he could not see who came and went—whether a man stole in or out on a summer morning or an autumn afternoon. In winter it was better, for he could be around the house almost all the time. There would be whole days when he could watch the lane leading up from the road to the house; and no one could very well come in from the other side, because his tracks would show too plainly on the snow-covered ice. Willard was glad about the lake. It stretched along protectingly for nearly a mile; and when it was not frozen, he took good care to look often, to see whether a boat were hidden anywhere along the shore.

When his watch showed twelve o'clock, Willard stood his hoe up against the fence, and plodded back to the house, his shoes heavy with the loam of the field. The marks of his mental sufferings lay like scars upon his face.

* * * * *

That night Hubert said, after supper had been eaten, and when the dishes were being cleared away, "Let's go out on the lake, mama. Can't we? It's an awful nice evening."

"Why, I guess we can," said Averil. "Ask your father if he'll go."

"Pa," called Bert from the dining-room, where Averil

was putting the clean dishes into the cupboard, "will you go out on the lake with us?"

"No. I got plenty to do," answered Willard, more gruffly than he intended. He was in the summer kitchen, pouring out sour milk for the young pigs. "I got to look after things. You and your mother can go." Sometimes it seemed to Willard that he could not bear to go out on the lake with Averil. There had been times, when they first came to this place, when the lake had given him almost perfect happiness. He and Averil had gone out together, and he had felt an inexpressible joy in the coolness and beauty of the evening, and in the isolation of himself and his beloved between the water and the sky. But of late years it had been different. And there was the boy,—he would always be talking and somehow coming between.

Hubert and Averil went down to the place where the boat was tied. A small dock of two planks edged round with irises gave foothold for descent into the boat.

"I'll row," said Bert.

"Don't you want me to?" asked Averil.

"No. I'd rather." Hubert was proud of his skill as a boatman.

"All right." Averil settled herself in the stern of the boat, leaning back comfortably.

Hubert pushed off and sat down to the oars. He could row well enough, though clumsily. The lake was absolutely smooth, precisely picturing the sky above, pale greenish blue, with the stars nearly imperceptibly pricking their way out of the obscure. Long black shadows along the shore reflected the massed hemlocks. Farther on were low basswood trees, and tamaracks, and tangled shrubbery, now exuberantly in flower.

Averil gave scant attention to what the boy was saying. His voice sounded far away, indistinct, and unavailing. But its insistence brought her back from her own thoughts.

"It's kind of lonesome here," Averil heard him saying, as if the idea had but just occurred to him. "Don't you think it's lonesome, ma?"

The woman smiled, not without irony. "Why, I suppose it is," she answered. For years she had felt so keenly the pangs of loneliness that even talking about them seemed futile.

"Don't you get lonesome, when pa and I are away all day?" asked the lad. It was an evidence of his growing up in that half hour at the barn, that he knew enough to ask such a question.

"Yes, Bertie, of course I do," Averil replied. "But you know women always have a lot of work to do, that keeps them busy."

"Mm-huh," answered Bert.

"It keeps their hands busy," said Averil, as if to herself; "but it doesn't keep their minds busy enough. They have time to think of other things."

"What kind of things?" asked Hubert, labouring at the oars.

"Oh, things that have happened, and things that might happen," said Averil. "All sorts of things."

"It's funny to keep thinking all the time, isn't it, ma?" said Bert, after a while.

"Yes. We can't stop if we try," returned Averil.

"It's all right when you're thinking about something nice," commented the boy.

"Yes, but not so fine when you aren't," Averil agreed absently.

"My watch is just about down in here," said Hubert in a low voice. He peered down into the deep lake, black and horrible under the shadow of the boat. He seemed to see it lying there in the darkness and the mud, its white face defiled with ooze, its shining silver case sinking deeper out of all knowing, into inaccessible depths. Averil did not say anything. She was gazing fascinated into the blackness. Hubert said timidly: "Do you think we could fish it up, ma?"

"No, dear," Averil answered with firmness. "We couldn't fish it up. We couldn't possibly. Don't think about it any more. *Don't think about it.*"

"But you can't help thinking," answered Hubert helplessly. "You have to think, ma."

"Try not to," said Averil. "Think about something else, anyway."

Hubert felt a lump coming in his throat, as he pulled at the oars. His mother looked sharply at him through the dusk. Then he remembered what Uncle Alec had said: "No whining, from now on." So he began to whistle, a bit tremulously. "I can feather the oars," he said, and ostentatiously dipped the paddles so that they feathered, sparkling faintly in the light from the west.

"That's fine," said his mother.

They went along the shore, creeping near the low banks, overhung with Juneberry bushes, now in white bloom, showing foamily against the shade. Beyond, the hemlock grove was black and menacing. Any sort of thing might hide in there, Hubert thought. There was no knowing what might be spying upon them from the murky places.

"There's the graveyard," he said in an awed tone. Clearly outlined against the shadows nearest the ground

were a half-dozen white sagging headstones, surrounded by a broken picket fence. The earliest dwellers in the house had, as was often the custom in country districts, buried their dead near their own human habitation. In an undefined way, Averil felt the pathetic quality of the neglected little group of graves—relics of lives of passion and fear and anguish and flitting joy which had once seemed real, as real as what she was experiencing now. "It's queer to have a graveyard here," continued Hubert. "Why do you s'pose they did it, ma?"

"I suppose they wanted to have their own people near them," answered the woman uncomfortably. Why *should* anyone do a thing like that?

"But they weren't their own people after they were dead, were they?" asked Hubert. "If they'd gone to heaven, what was the use of having their graves here?" He felt the contradictory character of popular theology, the muddled sense which envisions the lost one among angel hosts, and still figures him as somewhere down under the grass, among the roots of trees.

"It does seem foolish," Averil said; "but people are that way." She did not feel capable of coping with the problems of the next life. This one was confusing enough. She merely wanted to rest there on the surface of the lake, in the precarious safety of the boat, and feel the peace of dusk and loveliness which she only dimly understood. The talk of the boy irritated her, not acutely, but vaguely; partly because she knew he was waking up to the unexplainable phases of life, and beginning to ask questions which she could never answer, and partly because she wanted to escape such questions herself, and to be let alone to get what she could out of an hour of beauty in the midst of the ugliness of her ex-

istence. To distract herself and him, she said, "I must get your father to fix that fence and straighten up the stones. It don't seem right, somehow, to have the place so kind of forgotten. Somebody cared for those people once."

"Yes, I wish he'd do it," said Hubert. He pondered. "How could they sell their folks' graves, I wonder? Did pa know he was *buying graves*, when he bought this land?"

"I—I don't think so," faltered Averil. "I don't suppose he did."

Hubert fell silent, thinking about what his mother had said, and about the strange idea of people's being both dead and alive at the same time—up in the sky and down in the ground. He looked up at the sky where the stars were showing, as if he might see some spectral being afloat there. But the oars slipped in his hands, and the boat swerved from its path, and water splattered on his mother's white knitted shawl; and so he gave up the problems of theology, and took to feathering the oars again, to show that he was not so clumsy as he seemed.

CHAPTER III

THE next evening, immediately after supper, Alexander McLean drove over in his buckboard. He came over frequently—two or three times a week. There was nothing to keep him at home, he said; and he had to find company among the neighbours. Alec and Willard had been friends ever since the Faradays had come to this region. In fact it was in an indirect way through the influence of Alec that the Faradays had come. About the time that Averil and Willard were married, in Western New York State, and Willard was trying to make up his mind whether to settle down there, or migrate farther west, his uncle had a letter from a young man named McLean, who had gone out to Wisconsin the year before. He had painted an attractive picture of his prosperity, and had said that a farm near him was for sale, and he hoped that someone from home would come out. "Why don't you try it, Will?" the uncle had said. "I'll help you a little, and your father can give you a boost, and you can buy the place all right, with a mortgage on it."

"I don't know whether Averil will go or not," said Willard.

But it seemed that Averil was willing to go, almost eager. She was tired of being always in one place, she said. She wanted a change.

The uncle remarked one day that he had an idea that

Averil had met this young McLean before he went West. She had visited in the next county, where McLean lived, and he had visited her cousins. Willard had not thought to ask her until just before they started for their new home. "Did you ever see this McLean before?" he asked carelessly.

"How should I see him?" asked Averil.

"Why, Uncle Phil says he was over here once or twice, before he went West," Willard replied.

"It seems to me I do remember something about a fellow named McLean," said Averil, in as uninterested a tone as his own. "Does he have black hair?"

"I dunno," said Willard. "Maybe, for all I know." He had forgotten about the matter, and in the excitement of moving, he did not think of it again. Later when they had established themselves in the place by the lake, and were seeing something of McLean, Willard said to Averil, "Is he the fellow you thought you met?"

"He doesn't have black hair," said Averil; and Willard forgot the matter again. During recent years, he had thought of it often enough, but had been too proud to ask, and it seemed silly to bring up such a question after all these years of neighbourhood friendship.

Alexander drove into the yard with his pretty little white horse, Gretta, the one he liked best. He tied her to the post in the back yard, and came in at the dining-room door. "H'areyuh, Alec?" said Willard; and "H'areyuh, Will?" said Alec. "Family in?" queried the guest.

"Oh, yes, they're always in, pretty near," said Willard. "Come on through."

Averil appeared with her pleasant "Good evening," and Hubert came behind her, padding in his bare feet, clean from recent washing.

They went through the house to the front porch, facing the lake. There was an old settle there, a relic of the New York home. It stretched along the side of the house, under the windows. Averil and Hubert sat upon it, and the two men took the hickory chairs.

"Think it's going to rain?" asked Willard.

"Shouldn't wonder," answered Alec. He took out his pipe. Willard did not smoke. "Do you care if I light up?" he said.

Averil shook her head, as she always did.

"We need rain," said Willard. "Everything needs it like Sam Hill."

"Well, we had a shower a day or two ago. It ain't dry as a bone yet," answered Alec.

"No, but it will be, in a day or two."

"Mm-huh. How's your potatoes coming on?"

"Oh, pretty fair. I wish I'd put in another ten acres. Mart Hendricks says he heard in Prattsville that they're sure to be a dollar a bushel."

This was the sort of conversation which went on when the two men were together, the kind of conversation which went on when any two men were together. It continued, with variations on the wheat, the corn, the turnips, and the beans. Potatoes were the chief crop, in which the most breathless interest centred.

Averil could speak of the garden near the house, the vegetables for the summer food, the chickens, the young pigs. It was all very dull; yet there was in it, too, the stimulus of personal interest and profit. There was not much else to talk about. A Chicago daily paper came to both houses through the rural delivery, but it brought little of the outside world except a history of crime and scandal and cataclysms which concerned people so re-

mote as to have a quality of unrealness in this quiet country place. Presidential elections and particularly dramatic catastrophes and murders were the only events which stirred the farmers to a look at the world outside.

McLean tried as well as he could to include Averil and Bert in the conversation, but the boy began to kick his heels against the settle, and whistle through his teeth in a bored way. After a while, he went into the house and came out with a copy of the *Youth's Companion*. "What you got there?" inquired McLean, taking his pipe from his mouth.

"See, Uncle Alec," said Bert, coming up close to the guest, "there's something here that tells how pollywogs grow into frogs." He fumbled at the paper, trying to find the place. "And there's a story about a man that went up on a mountain and the wolves got after him."

"Fine stuff," said Alec heartily. He held his pipe away from him with his left hand, while his right took friendly hold of the boy's blue shirt-sleeve. Bert came closer, and leaned against Alec's chair, and spread the paper out. Alec slid his arm around the waist of the lad with a caressing gesture which made Averil catch her breath. The heads of the boy and the man bent over the page which depicted the pollywogs.

Willard, watching, shifted uneasily in his chair. Averil saw him wince as Alec's arm tightened around the boy. He moved his feet back and forth nervously; he took out his pocket-knife and twisted it in his hands, and put it back into his pocket. He tapped the arm of his chair with his fingers. The others could not know the grinding pain in his heart, which he so often felt. He breathed irregularly; a shivering came through his shoulders, a tightening in his throat. The pain was not

physical, perhaps, but it seemed as if it were, because it was so insistent and vivid and unescapable.

For a few minutes he watched Alec and Bert, closely touching, absorbed, happy in this intimate contact; then, unable to endure any more, he said abruptly, "Time for you to go to bed, Buster. It's high time you went to bed."

Hubert looked up, surprised, and then looked at his mother. "Why, it's not anywhere near time," he said, in frank amazement. "It isn't dark yet."

"It don't have to be dark," said Willard. He slipped his hands into his trousers-pockets, to conceal the twitching of his fingers. "You better run right along."

Alec took his hand away from the boy's body, and let it drop down against the chair. He put his pipe back into his mouth. Furtively his eyes met those of Averil, who was sitting so that Willard could not see her face. She gave him a flickering glance of apprehension.

"I don't want to go to bed," cried Hubert indignantly. "It isn't time. I never go to bed as early as this."

"You do as I tell you." Willard felt himself quivering with the uncontrollable anger which too frequently had wrought his undoing. "You heard what I said."

"I don't want to go." The boy was stung by a sense of injustice. "I don't have to go, do I, Uncle Alec?"

"I don't have the say about it," McLean replied; his teeth snapped tight upon the stem of his pipe. "You must do as your—as you're told, I suppose, lad."

"I won't go, I won't!" the boy burst out. "It ain't time, and I won't go."

"You won't, eh?" Willard was holding to the sides of his chair. He felt dimly that he must restrain himself

from doing something that he might be sorry for. Hubert was seldom violent or saucy.

"Uncle Alec," the boy said appealingly, "don't let him make me go."

Alec, his face dark, but his lips laughing, said carelessly, "Oh, I can't mix up in this. Are you sure it's time, Will?"

"My watch is in the house," said Willard sullenly; "but I guess I know."

"If I had my watch, I could tell," shouted the boy, his face distorted with sudden grief. "If I had my watch, that Uncle Alec gave me——" He choked, but he was not crying.

Nobody paid any attention to the remark. "You'd better go on," said Averil, trying to speak evenly. "I'm sure you're tired enough, and you have to get up and go to school to-morrow. Come on. I'll go with you." Then she was in a panic, for she had a horror of leaving the two men together, in such a crisis.

Alec came to her rescue. "I don't think he needs anyone to go with him," he said quietly. "I see he's got his feet washed, and he's all ready."

"I'll go with him if he don't hurry up," blustered Willard, "and I'll take a good stout stick along. Now, you scoot, kid, before you get into trouble." He was sorry for the fuss which he had kicked up, but there was nothing to do now but go on.

Hubert, raging, turned to go. "Here's your paper," said Alec, picking up the loosened pages, which had fallen to the floor. He gave the boy a sympathetic glance.

Bert muttered a word of thanks, and went into the house. They could hear him slamming and slapping

things about, and then pounding up the stairs, hate and defiance expressed in every sound. The three people on the porch sat in awkward silence. They all knew that Hubert had been sent to bed because Willard had not been able to bear seeing him in the arms of Alec. "Boys never want to go to bed," said Alec laughing; but even he could not think of anything more to say. The silence threatened to become terrible.

Averil spoke desperately of the lake, of the little white ripples showing, which might mean a storm; of the loons, crying pathetically on the other shore. Then she thought about the graveyard. "Oh, Willard," she said, "when Bertie and I were out in the boat last night, we noticed how bad the little graveyard looks. The fence is broken, and the headstones are down. I think it would be nice if you'd fix it up, some day when you have time."

The reaction to Willard's anger had come. He sat shamed, weakened. He stared at his wife without speaking.

"I haven't seen it for a long time," said Alec casually. "The frost is hard on the headstones."

Willard raised his head with a pained motion. "Well, it's a good enough place," he said. "You can put me in there, when my time comes."

"Oh, Will!" cried Averil sharply.

"Well, you can," the man persisted. "I'd rather be there than anywheres else."

Alec sat looking at him steadily. Then he rose, yawning, and knocked the ashes from his pipe. "I guess I'll go on," he said.

"It's early yet," said Averil politely.

"Yes, don't hurry, Alec," put in Willard in a constrained tone.

"Well, I got a cow that needs looking after," replied McLean. "I guess I'd go home and see how she's getting along."

Averil and Willard went with him when he untied his horse and got into the buckboard. As soon as he had gone, Averil went into the house and up to Hubert's room. Willard went back to the porch, and sat brooding, with his eyes on the darkening lake.

* * * * *

The busy days of summer went on, full of the hard labor of the farm. School was out now, and Hubert helped his mother in the house or in the garden, or he fished or swam or read his books and papers. He did not see much of the other boys, for most of them had to work harder than he did, and were kept pretty closely to the tasks set for them by parental masters.

The harvest came, as harvests will come, after the patient suspense, after the sprouting and ripening of the plant, whose seed is in itself. Willard Faraday and Alexander McLean habitually changed works; for neither could accomplish certain tasks alone, or even with the help at hand. Alec called on the telephone one day, "I'm cutting my rye this week. Can you come over?"

Willard went, and Averil and Bert were alone all day. There was no dinner to get for Willard; and so they had a picnic out under the acacias, now showing green pods instead of scented racemes; and near the lake, in a green covert screened by amelanchiers heavy with red and purple berries. The picnic was so successful that on the second day they asked Caddie Hunt to go with them. This time they went out beyond the hemlocks, past the graveyard with its grassy hummocks and sagging stones

(Willard had never found time to straighten them), and on to a point well out in the lake, where one big butter-nut tree made a canopy and bower. From here they could see, far off through a gap in the woods, a chimney of Alec McLean's house, which was set on a low hill. The two children did not notice how Averil kept looking toward that distant place.

"It seems so far off, out here," said Caddie, taking the food out of the basket; "as if we were miles away from everybody. I like it."

"It's funny not to have to eat at the table," said Bert. "I wish we didn't ever have to. I wish we could just sit out under the trees, always, and eat like this."

"You'd want something different in winter," responded Averil. But she knew that the boy was unconsciously expressing his happiness in freedom from a restraint which was growing more and more irksome, as Willard Faraday grew more suspicious and less controlled. Averil herself felt the relief from that searching glance, that rigid reserve, broken by furious ebullitions of rage and pain. To eat in a leisurely way, looking across the spread white cloth at only serene young faces, innocent of jealous hate; to lie under the trees and watch the branches swaying, or to sit and sew with long pauses between the running of seams,—these things were paradise to the wearied woman. Caddie and Hubert played ball, watched the squirrels, ate blue-berries and June-berries, or sat replete and hilarious, telling tales of school or guessing riddles. Caddie was a year older than Bert, and mentally more mature than he by several years; and yet the two seemed to find a contented companionship in each other.

They all trailed home when the sun was going down,

laughing and bringing in bunches of flowers and leaf-baskets full of ripe wild strawberries. As they neared the house, Willard came plodding up the lane, after his day's work. He was sweaty, drooping-shouldered, dark of face, and gloomy of mien. A day with Alexander McLean was a strain for him, a not inconsiderable form of torture. To offset its miseries, he worked with demoniac endeavour, pitching and stacking and hurrying till he dripped with sweat and panted from his toil. "Don't work so hard, man," expostulated Alec. He himself stopped often to wash, to smoke, to refresh his body with food or drink. But Willard had doggedly held to his own methods.

A stillness fell upon the little group at sight of him. He came up the lane without speaking, eyeing the three as if they were strangers. Averil, perturbed, noted the severity of his aspect. The shadow on the landscape, increasing with the fall of the sun, seemed somehow to be caused by his approach. She shrank as he went past her, sickened by the smell of sweat, the streaks of dirt along his cheeks, where dust had settled and moisture had run down. His shirt lay soiled and soaked along his back. She felt a hard constriction in her throat, a rising of disgust and shame, and of guilt at the intensity of her recoil. Her hand went up to her throat. She grew pale, steadied herself against Hubert's arm. Willard, facing the group, studied her face from under gathered brows. He stopped, clinching his hands, his mouth working, his nostrils flaring.

"Why do you look like that?" he cried, leaning forwards toward his wife. All day he had been thinking, fearing, conjecturing, cursing. The long day's labour had been as pastime, to his thoughts. He was infuriated

at the sight of her now, swaying there, looking at him in disgust only half concealed by caution—her fresh starched gown, her smooth black hair, her hand at her bosom.

“Like what? I’m not looking like anything,” she parried. “What do you mean, Will?”

The children drew a step back, edging off from the man who, even to their unseeing sense, had a menacing air.

“You know what I mean,” he replied, thrusting his face close to hers. She shrank away from him still farther. “You look as if I was some wild man, some wild animal that you couldn’t bear to touch. Of course I’m dirty, of course I’m sweaty. I been working in the field all day, to earn money for you and your boy. I can’t stay at home and sit around dressed up, with my hair combed and perfumery on me. I have to work for you and your boy.”

“I know you’re tired, Will,” said Averil, with compassion in her tone, and condemnation for her own involuntary shrinking. “I know it’s hard to be in the field all day. I’m sorry.”

“Being sorry don’t do any good,” he broke in. “Being sorry—what is that? I’m sorry too—I’m sorry for a lot of things, but that don’t do any good.”

“Oh, Willard,” she protested, “the children——”

He came closer, put out his blackened hands, slid his arm about her waist. “You don’t want to come near me, but you shall, just the same.” The anger which had been burning in his heart all day as he came and went within the sight of Alec McLean now forced itself flaming before all who saw. “I’ll show you.” He held her in his arms, crushed her to him in a fierce embrace

against his body, grimed with dust and acrid smelling; he rubbed his rough smeared face against her cheek, aching to defile its white cool smoothness, straining to mortify her flesh with the contact of his earthly frame.

Her eyes closed. Her head was held back, away from him, her body stiffened, her muscles rigid with abhorrence. The flowers which she held fell in a tumbled heap beside the path. He pushed her off, so that she staggered and almost fell. The two young people stood spell-bound, half comprehending. Shuddering, Averil steadied herself, her eyelids drooping, her teeth gritted in disgust and humiliation. Faraday, his head bowed, his shoulders slumped, was striding rapidly away toward the house.

Hubert took hold of his mother's sleeve. His eyes were still bewildered with what he had beheld. "Did he hurt you, ma?" he asked anxiously. He had not understood, before, that caresses could ever hurt. "Why did he do that? Why?"

"No, no. I'm all right," said Averil. She could not answer the second of his questions.

Caddie, distressed and shaken, stood by, not knowing what to say. "I think I'll have to go," she stammered at last.

"Bertie and I will walk along with you. You can't go home alone." Averil was glad of an excuse to get away from the house, to recover her self-possession, and to give Willard a chance to recover his. He had had his supper at McLean's, and so she did not have to go in and prepare a meal for him. "Run and tell your father where we're going," she said.

Hubert, obviously hesitating, ran after Willard, who had disappeared into the shed. He heard the splashing

of water, and did not venture in. "Pa," he called, "we're walking home with Caddie."

"All right," the gruff voice responded.

Hubert ran back. Averil had gathered up her flowers. "We'll put them into the edge of the lake till we come back," she said. She did not want to go into the house, much less into the summer kitchen, where Willard was bathing. She wondered why he had not gone to a secluded place along the shore, for a dip into the cool water, after his day's work. "I suppose he's too tired," she said to herself.

They walked along the road to the arm of the lake, and Hubert put the stems of the flowers in, and weighted them with a stone. It was a good half-mile, perhaps three-quarters, to the Hunt home, and they walked slowly. The children found something to say, though the odd scared look had not left Caddie's face. Averil could not bring herself to talk. What was there to say? She shuddered, her throat aching.

In sight of the house, she turned back. "We'll watch till you get home," she said to the girl. "It's too late to go in." Caddie discerned that Mrs. Faraday did not want to talk even to the amiable Libbie Hunt.

Averil and Bert walked home without much speech. Bert felt a vague protecting instinct, as if he wanted to do something for his mother. And yet he felt uneasy too, with a misty antagonism which was a kind of wonder whether, after all, she had not treated his father badly. He could see for himself that she had not wanted the man to touch her. He didn't blame her for that; but it was true, as his father had said, that there was no fun in being in the field all day. A person didn't do it just to get dirty and annoy other people who could

sit around in clean clothes. The boy felt the confusion which comes to the young when their sense of justice begins to war with their instincts and affections.

Averil walked with dragging footsteps along the road in the cool dusk. Her situation was becoming intolerable. There had been times before, when things had been bad, but they had blown over, and there had been long periods of safety and quietness. But now they were getting worse and worse. Perhaps it was because Bert was getting older, and was inevitably forced into Willard's thoughts and attention.

When they got home, there was a yellow square of light in Willard's window upstairs, and another at the dining-room window. The lamp was lighted, and set in the middle of the blue-checked cloth. In the kitchen were dark wet spots upon the floor, where the man had splashed the water from his bath. A wet towel lay soggy on the floor, and soiled garments were in a pile on a chair. Willard had hurried with his evening's work and gone to bed. The pail of milk, unstrained, stood on the table, its faint odour perceptible in the still air.

Averil was glad that she did not have to face her husband again that night. She strained the milk and put it away; and set out the dishes for breakfast. Hubert, yawning and stretching, was suddenly so tired that he forgot everything else, and called out drowsily, "I'm going to bed."

"That's right," said his mother. "I'll shut up the house." With relief in her heart, she heard him climbing the stairs. She wanted to be alone.

She locked up the back of the house, and turned down the lamp in the dining-room. Then she went and sat on the front steps, overlooking the lake. The night was

dark now, with only stars and fireflies to mitigate its gloom. The heavy dew of summer lay along the grass. The lake, a shade lighter than the shadows around it, showed dimly under the cloudy blue-black of the sky.

Her crossed arms on her knees, Averil leaned forward into the night, her mind plumbing the depths of her distress. Never, it seemed, had it been so hard to bear as now. Of course, there had been times when she had felt the same yielding to despair. But now there was added to it the thought of Hubert and his growing up, and the strangeness of his place between her and Willard. For a moment, the thought of death crossed her mind—the ease with which she might, here and now, slip away into the darkness of the water. It was one solution, perhaps the only logical one; but on the instant she knew that she had not the courage to take it. She loved Bertie too well, loved life itself too well, in spite of her grief and suffering.

She rose, took a step forward, and looked up at the window in Willard's room, facing the lake. It was black, and the boughs of trees hung over it. Probably he was asleep. He had had a hard day, and would now be sodden with the stupor of the worker-in-the-fields, after the cessation of toil. Averil remembered how he had lain like a stone beside her in the earlier years, while she lay watching the moonlight crawling up the wall, and hearing the whippoorwills and owls at their liquid or guttural crying.

She was glad that he was asleep. He seemed so much farther removed from her existence, which lay so near to his, yet never intermingled. She felt, too, the relief for him which would come with the suspending of his pain in slumber. Even she began to feel a measure of the

peace of night. She could not go to bed. It was not late, except as counted by the standards of weary country drudges.

Waveringly she slipped along the edge of the porch, and then walked about in the grass on the side of the house farthest from Willard's room. The grass was cool and grateful to her feet. She felt impelled to get away from that room, the man in it, the house enclosing them. Noiselessly, dark as the shadowed bushes, she went down the lane toward the road. If she might only run, run far, and never turn back to the hard rigours of her servitude! But she must not go beyond the gate which barred her home from the highway.

She approached the gate. A dark form stood beside it. Starting, tremulous, with fear, she gasped, stood rooted. Of all her fears the greatest was that the man standing there should not be the one desired.

"Averil." A whisper came, almost undiscerned.

"Alec." She slid forward, noiseless as a leaf.

"Did you know I was here?"

"No. I never dreamed. I just came down because I couldn't stay there—couldn't sit still. Oh, Alec, you must go. Don't stay—don't stay. It isn't right. It isn't safe."

But her hand felt for his in the dark, clutched, trembled in his palm.

"Averil, are you suffering?"

"Yes."

"Is it worse?"

"Oh, yes. It's hard, so hard, Alec."

He put his face down on her hair. His clean crisp linen rasped along her neck. The barred gate lay between them. "What can I do for you, my darling?"

"Nothing, nothing, nothing. Only go."

"In a minute." Still he held her there.

"How do you come here?"

"I was bathing in the lake. I came over to see—well, just to see the house. I hardly hoped you'd be here. I've stood here a dozen times this summer, and you never came."

"It isn't safe. Don't do it again—ever."

"I know. It won't do. I'll be going." He loosed her hands, and she drew back. But again he leaned over the low gate, reaching for her. She was glad of the gate between them. "I'm coming over next week for the harvesting," he said. "You'll see me then?"

"Oh, no, no! Oh, Alec, don't do anything that wouldn't be safe," she pleaded. "We must stop it all. We've got on sometimes for months—a year—without being anything but friends. We must go on now—always; on Bertie's account, on everybody's account." She was scared, trembling.

He assented. "Yes, I know. It's best. This is the end. But kiss me, Averil."

"No."

"Not any more?"

"No. Good-bye." She tore herself away from the gate, stumbled backward out of reach of his hands.

"Good-bye."

She turned and ran back to the house. Tears were wet on her face. Panting and unnerved, she sat down on the steps, listening. Alec had not followed her. She thought she heard someone in the house, a foot on stair or floor. But again, everything was quiet, with the background of night noises: the peeping of hylases in the mud, the lapping of waves, the rustle of tiny furred feet, the dis-

tant chattering of raccoons. Averil took a long breath, dried her eyes upon her sleeve, relaxed, sagged against a post. She was safe. She could sit a little longer, thinking of Alec, counting each step as he walked home in the summer night, under the beneficent protection of the dark.

* * * * *

After Averil and Hubert left her, Caddie Hunt ran home, and dashed into the house through the side door opening into the dining-room. Her mother was undressing John-Benjy in the kitchen. She looked up, unbuttoning his underwaist. "Well, did you have a nice time?" she asked.

"Yes, we had a perfectly grand picnic," Caddie replied, out of breath. "We had awfully good things to eat, and we sat around and didn't come away till we got ready."

"Mrs. Faraday came home with you, didn't she?" said Libbie, her forehead puckered. "You didn't walk home alone?"

"No. She and Bert came with me. Has Benjy been a good boy?" Caddie stooped to kiss the youngster, rumpling his yellow hair. The light from the kerosene lamp fell on her face, and showed the odd look there.

"Yes, a fine boy. What is it, Carraline?" asked her mother.

Caddie hesitated, holding her hat in her hand, and fumbling with the glass beads at her neck. "Mr. Faraday came home while I was there," she said. "He acted awfully funny."

"How was that?" Libbie reached for the little boy's

nightgown. She had her own views about Willard and Averil Faraday.

"Well, he came home from Mr. McLean's—you know he'd been changing works—and he'd been in the field, of course, and he was terribly dirty. It doesn't seem as if he had to get as dirty as that, do you think, mother?"

"Why, I don't know," answered Libbie judicially. "Harvesting is hard work, and it was warm to-day."

"Yes, I know," said Caddie. "Well, anyhow, he came, and he walked up close to Mrs. Faraday, and she kind of scrooched back, because he was so—so sweaty, you know; and she looked sort of sick; and he just put his arms around her and hugged her up tight to him like a bear, mother, or—or something horrid, and she pushed him off, and he talked real loud to her, and said queer things."

Libbie's usually placid face was disturbed. "What sort of things?" she asked, cuddling Benjy.

"Oh, I can't remember; something about working to get money for her and her boy. That doesn't sound so bad, does it? Well, I can't think just what he said, but it sounded bad when he said it. He seemed horribly mad about something—and yet he was hugging her like that. It was funny, wasn't it, mother?"

"I suppose he was tired," Libbie replied equably. Her face did not betray her surmises.

"It was kind of—horrid," said Caddie, repeating the only word which seemed to describe the scene of which she had been an unwilling witness. "It was sort of queer, anyhow. I'll take Brother-Boy up to bed. I suppose you've been working every minute."

"No, I rested quite a lot," sighed Elizabeth. "But I got the eggs all packed, so that I can take 'em into town to-morrow, or send 'em by Alec McLean, if we see him going by; and I got the last of the carrots weeded. It does seem as if that pusley and quack-grass grow like magic."

After Caddie had gone upstairs, Libbie picked up the child's clothes and put them away, and tidied the sink where she had given him his hasty bath. She sighed again, thinking of Averil Faraday. Libbie had a heart of compassion for women. "She has a pretty hard time, I imagine," she said half aloud. "There's something wrong there. I hate to think so, but how can I help it? I'll go over and see her to-morrow. If she's lonesome, she'll be glad to see even me. And if the time comes when she needs somebody, I don't want her to feel that there's nobody to do anything for her."

The next afternoon, she packed the eggs into the back of the buggy, and hitched up the horse. Caddie and the boy were going with her. She did not like to leave them alone. "We'll stop at Mrs. Faraday's first, and then go on to the village," she said. "We may be in a hurry, coming back, and not have time to stop."

She hitched the horses down at the gate, and did not drive up through the lane. Averil was sitting on the front porch, sewing at some shirts for Bertie. She rose, looking pleased, as the trio approached. "I'm so glad to see you," she said. "I was feeling lonesome. Willard is helping Alec with the last of his rye, to-day, you know."

"I just thought I'd come in and say howdy-do," said Libbie, sinking upon the settle. "Is Bert here?"

"Oh, yes, he's around somewhere. Come, Benjy, come

and see me." Averil took the child on her lap, pressing him to her with a caressing motion. But presently Caddie took the little boy and went to find Hubert, who was somewhere in the region of the barn.

"We don't see each other very often," said Libbie, when she and her hostess were alone. "It don't seem just right, when we're such near neighbours—or near for the country, anyhow."

"No, it doesn't," answered Averil, her face losing its immobility. "I like to have a woman come in. It seems so sort of comfortable. But all the women are so busy in the summer with harvesters and preserves, and all the children at home, and everything, they don't get away very much." She did not add that those who could get away did not always stop to see her.

"I believe that we should be more neighbourly, all of us," said Libbie, wiping her face, red with the heat. "Women need all the company and help they can get from each other, don't you think so, Averil?"

"Yes, I do," said the younger woman, her hands moving nervously across the sewing in her lap. "I know that's so. Lots of times they need something—need comforting or encouragement (I don't just mean actual help with what they're doing), and they don't know which way to turn."

"Yes, I know how that is," replied Libbie Hunt.

Each woman sat silently looking across the bright flat surface of the lake, each one reviewing the secrets of her own heart, touching the sore places that needed comforting. Each was tempted to tell her secrets to the other, but each refrained. Each was sorry for the other, but dared not make mention of her reasons, lest she appear prying or bold. And so they both sat wordless

for a space, shut up in the tight compartments of individual experience and fear.

"Have you done much canning?" asked Averil at last, finding a safe subject for talk. Fifteen minutes passed in an exchange of achievement and method in canning green vegetables for winter use. "I'll get some cookies for the children," said Averil, going inside the house. Whoops sounded, after an interval during which the cookies had been dispensed. Averil came back with oatmeal cookies and strawberry shrub, on a tray. The two women ate and drank together.

When Libbie rose to go, Averil took both her hands in her own. "I know that you are *there*, right within call, even if I don't see you every day," she said.

"If you need me, you'll call on me, won't you?" said Libbie wistfully. She wanted to do something for Averil, but she did not know what.

"Yes, I will. I surely will," responded the other. "Of course, I can't imagine anything in particular that could happen," she added, perhaps to reassure herself.

"No, of course not," Elizabeth assented cheerfully. "But one never knows——"

"Come in again—come often," urged Averil.

Libbie Hunt went to call Caddie and Benjy, and they all drove away in the hot sun, Averil waving at them from the gate. She felt comforted, and her soreness of heart had grown less, for the moment at least. And Libbie, widowed and yet not widowed, felt that after all these years of being neighbours, she and Averil had come closer to each other than ever before, bound by a common need, actual and apprehended.

CHAPTER IV

DURING the summer, Averil seldom went to the village. It was a mile and a half away—too far to be reached by walking, in hot weather. Willard was busy and did not want to lose time for himself and the horses; he could not stop his work to take her to town. Once a week, usually on Wednesday, after his work was done, he hitched up the weary horses, and rode to the village to buy groceries. Averil and Hubert sometimes went with him, when he was good-humoured enough to ask them. Hubert loved going. His life was so restricted—revolving in the little circle of country which enclosed his own home and Uncle Alec's and the homes of the few neighbours, that even going into the village was worth while.

There was the one main street, with its half-dozen business buildings and a scanty group of dwelling houses. There was the blacksmith shop which even at that date was showing signs of aspiring to be a Ford repair station; a mill where feed for horses and cattle was still ground, though flour was no longer its glory; and a general store, where a medley of goods was displayed, and where country and village folk met and renewed their acquaintance from week to week.

Hubert would linger as long as he could on the steps of the store, where other boys stood grinning and displaying their purchases. Sometimes he had money him-

self; and if he had none, his father would buy him candy or gum or peanuts, or a red necktie. When Averil came, she usually sat in the buggy, while Willard did the buying. She would not chaffer as the other women did, over their butter and eggs. She felt better to sit and let them talk to her from the broad step of the store. It pleased her perhaps to feel a sense of reserve, even at the cost of being spoken of afterward as uppish; possibly, too, there was a shyness in her which dreaded the prospect of pushing herself in where she might not be approved.

The church, a stunted replica of the white New England church which the founders of the village had remembered, stood on a hill beyond the short main street. It was a Presbyterian church, in which all Protestant creeds united.

The Faradays went to church intermittently and gave something twice a year for the support of the minister. He was usually either a young theological student getting experience and a stipend with which to nourish a too-hastily-acquired wife and family; or an elderly failure on the point of superannuation, shunted here to ease the conscience of the Presbytery and to mitigate his panic in the face of an impecunious old age. Church meant little to the Faradays, and at that probably as much as it meant to the other people within the district. Averil felt a deep desire for religion, and reproached herself for not bringing Hubert up in a more godly way.

In recognition of the sum which Willard grudgingly gave toward his salary, the minister called to see the Faradays once or twice a year. A day or two after Libbie Hunt's call upon her, Averil was startled and somewhat annoyed to see the ministerial equipage approaching and turning in at the lane. The minister,

Mr. Sutton, tied his horse and came walking up through the yard. He was a young man, wearing an ill-fitting blue serge suit, and a cheap straw hat. He held his shoulders jauntily, yet did not forget the dignity which his position demanded. Averil ran to take off her apron, and to plump up the cushions on the sofa in the front room.

The minister came in with assurance, his undistinguished face bearing the smile of his profession. Big teeth, freckles, and outstanding ears gave him an unprepossessing appearance, for which he was not to blame. The preliminaries of greeting and comment upon the weather completed, he proceeded to the business of his call—offering the privileges of religion to his parishioners.

“I don’t see you and your family at church very often,” he began.

“No,” said Averil reluctantly, “I don’t suppose you do. We can’t always go.”

“It’s a serious thing to neglect the means of grace,” said the young man.

“Maybe,” answered Averil doubtfully. “But Willard works hard all the week, and so do I. It seems good to get a little rest on Sunday, and it’s hard to dress up and go out on a hot day——”

“The weather should make no difference in our love of our religion,” the man returned.

“N-no,” assented Averil; “but I don’t know as I love it very much. If I did, I might be more anxious to go.”

A red flag of anger showed in the cheek of the young minister. “It is sin that keeps a person from loving it,” he retorted.

Averil flushed, too. “Maybe,” she said again. “But I can’t help it if I don’t.”

"God hates sinners," burst out the young man vehemently.

Averil felt a surge of reprehension. "I thought there was something about love in the Bible," she said with unexpected audacity. "I mean the love of God," she amended, seeing the incipient offense on the face before her.

"God can't love sinners," he responded, shocked and indignant.

"I don't see that that's very much help," said Averil miserably. She could not for the moment keep her lips from shaking.

"The only help is to turn from sinful ways," cried the man with solemnity. He had nothing to offer except the stock phrases of his vocation. He was not by nature unkind; but he was a very ignorant young man, who took himself with all seriousness, and had been taught that he was called to rebuke sinners.

"I don't understand what you mean by that sort of a hating-God," said Averil. "I need religion—we all need it—but I don't get much good out of the kind that they give us in church."

The man was angered as by a personal attack. "It's because your heart is hardened," he returned, his voice getting louder. The Adam's-apple was working in his throat.

"I don't believe in a God like that," Averil heard herself saying. "I don't believe that God ever put us in a hard place, and then punished us for being there."

The minister stared at her, his jaw falling. "Beware!" he shouted. "Beware how you insult the Almighty with atheism!"

"I—I didn't mean it for atheism." Averil was horrified at the imputation. "I'm not an atheist."

"You're an unconverted woman," the young man flung out at her.

Averil felt the futility of the argument, though she did not know how many times tired humanity had gone over it, in the hope of understanding and consolation. She felt the hopelessness of any interpretation of her emotions by this man, calling himself a minister of the gospel. She saw, although she could not have put her knowledge into words, that he had no content of experience in his soul, no comprehension of human struggles, no toleration for views not taught in the sectarian school where he had received his meagre education. He was undertaking the fine task of reconciling man to God, with only his ignorant and self-satisfied good intentions as the instrument for his achieving.

"Oh, I can't talk about it," said Averil suddenly.

"May the Lord soften your heart." The young man rose to go, glad of the opportunity of escape. He was baffled before this woman, to him enigmatic, with her white smooth face, her black coronet of hair, her rebellion against his constituted authority. He was used to having people listen with respect and take his statements and admonition without question. Averil's few words, mild and tentative as they were, aroused in him a suspicion of his own wisdom, even of his own authority, which he tried to conceal from himself by condemnation.

To moderate the embarrassment of his departure, Averil made inquiries concerning his wife and child, and he in his turn assumed an interest in the health of

Willard and Hubert. They were well, Averil said; but she was thinking how ill they were in their relation to each other.

When Mr. Sutton had gone, Averil sat down and cried, at the folly and hopelessness of what had taken place. She was sorry and ashamed, when she thought of what she had said; yet she did not see how she could honestly have said anything else.

She got up and took the Bible from its place on the table, and opened it. Surely there was something there for her. The Bible, she had always heard, had been the consolation of suffering hearts in every age. She opened it and read, "*Behold I come quickly.*" What did that mean? Pondering, she shut the book and put it back on the table. What was the use? She knew that there was a treasure of wisdom in the volume, but she did not have the key. Her tears flowed down afresh.

She saw Willard coming through the field and in at the back yard. He was dirty; his hands were smeared, his shoes covered with filth. "Who was here?" he asked curiously.

"The minister," she answered, trying not to be curt.

"What did he say to you?" he queried, noting her wet eyes and fevered face.

"Nothing that mattered," she told him. "I wasn't crying about that. He doesn't know anything. He's just silly," she said weakly.

"Women should go to church," remarked Willard gravely. This was his conviction, as it is that of many men who do not care for religion themselves.

"What's the use?" said Averil, more to herself than to him. "A man like that doesn't know anything about life or what people want to hear."

"They *ought* to hear things sometimes that they don't *want* to hear," said Willard shrewdly.

"Well, he doesn't know what they ought to hear, then," answered his wife. "He doesn't know *anything*."

"You must think you're pretty smart," responded Willard with asperity, "criticizing the *minister* like that."

"You don't think much of him yourself," Averil gave answer.

"Well, I wouldn't say that he don't know what's what in religion," said Willard. It was true that he had more than once said that he didn't think much of the young sprig; and yet it was another thing to condone the effrontery of a woman in making light of a preacher, whoever he was. Sutton was a poor stick of a fellow in some ways, but he had ten times as much education as Averil had. And what did she know about life, that she was so bold to say what Sutton didn't know? This was a question which would bear consideration.

Willard went back to his work, brooding. Averil wept again at the uselessness of seeking consolation in religion.

* * * * *

Bert was balancing himself on the gate at the foot of the lane, when Uncle Alec came along in his buckboard. The truth was that Bert had seen Uncle Alec go by on his way to the village, an hour before, and was watching for him to come back.

Alec pulled up his horses. "Hullo!" he called. "Jump in and ride along."

Bert bounded over the gate and ran to the road. "I don't know whether I dast," he said, aching to climb into the buckboard, which sagged at the side with Uncle Alec's weight.

"Well, then, run and tell your mother you're going."

Averil frowned when she heard, but after a minute, she said, "All right. Go if you want to."

He scudded away. He loved to go to Uncle Alec's. He climbed over the wheel, and settled down beside the warm bulk of Alexander.

"Coolish to-day," said the man. "Well, Bert, how are you? Fine, eh?"

"Sure. I'm fine," answered the boy.

"Find it pretty dull, with no school to go to, I suppose." The man cast a humourous grey eye at the little fellow beside him. "Just counting the days till you can go again, eh?"

Hubert looked up out of the corner of his eye. "You bet," he said. "Just can't hardly wait. But it's quite a while yet."

They both laughed. "Well, it won't hurt you to learn a little something," said McLean. "There's an awful lot to learn."

"Mm-huh," said Bert. "Say, Uncle Alec, I ain't cried, not really cried, since that day you told me not to."

"I thought you hadn't," answered Alec, grinning; yet he was moved, too, as one could see who looked at his eyes. "I kind of had my lamps on you. I thought once or twice you came near it—say that night a little while ago, when I was at your house, and your—when Willard made you go to bed."

"Oh, well," the boy replied, "crying when you're mad ain't quite the same as crying when your feelings are hurt, or when you're scared. Is it?"

"Well, no. I don't suppose it is," Alexander conceded. "But it's better to sort of keep a grip on yourself in any case."

"I s'pose it is," said Hubert humbly. Then he added, "He gets awful mad,—pa does, don't he?"

"Yes, he does, sometimes," Alexander admitted, clapping the back of his horse with the reins.

"Why does he do that?" the boy asked.

"I guess he feels as if he had a pretty hard time," Alec replied; "as if life had been sort of rough on him."

"Has it been?" asked Hubert. He had not thought of that.

"I guess it has in some ways." Alec had his eyes down, looking hard at the horse's back. "But then, I don't know as it's been any harder on him than on some of the rest of us. It ain't always easy, you know, kid. Things don't always go just as you'd like to have 'em."

"N-no." Bert thought that he had discovered that much about life.

"There's no use in getting mad about it," said Alec. "But sometimes it seems as if we don't use the sense we have."

"No," said Hubert.

They rode along, chatting now about the horses and the cattle that they passed. "Mart Hendricks says he's going to have an automobile next spring," said Alec. "I suppose I'll have to be getting one, too."

"Oh! Oh!" It seemed a wonderful thing to talk about buying an automobile.

Then they came in sight of Alec's farm, with its bushy green potato fields, and its smooth pasture lands, where fat cows were feeding. Alec had begun dairying before the other farmers in the neighbourhood had realized that they could do better with cows than with wheat.

There was the big nondescript house, painted a clean tan colour with brown trimmings. It looked well kept.

There were shrubs around the door, and vines over the porch. At some of the windows there were no curtains, only the stiff bought shades. A handsome collie dog came running to meet them, her beautiful intelligent face turned to her master with affection. Alec, getting out of the buckboard, ran his hand along her head with low words of welcome. "Good girl! Glad to see us, eh?" Hubert loved Meggie. He threw his arms around her neck.

They went into the house, through the kitchen. Mrs. Gundersen stood at the stove, stirring something. Sweet smells were in the air. "How do?" The old lady smiled and nodded to the boy.

"I thought I'd bring the lad home with me." Alec laid a hand caressingly along the boy's shoulder. "He'll be here for dinner."

"Yes, yes." The old lady ran to get a plate, a knife and fork. The table was already set in the dining-room. After the two men had washed their hands, it was time to sit down. There was Danish steak, with thick delicious brown gravy and onions. And later there was apple-cake, made of toasted breadcrumbs fried in butter, and mixed with sweet apple sauce and whipped cream: another Danish dish. "Pretty fine, eh?" commented Alec. "Here, take some more." It seemed to Bert as if he could never get enough.

"It's bully," said the boy, proud of using this grown-up expression.

After dinner they went into the sitting-room, a man's room, with an old desk-secretary, a leather couch, a book case, and pictures of horses and dogs. Upon the wall, near the book case, an old-fashioned frame of dark wood was hanging, and within the oval was a woman's

face with curls at the temples, a pleasant face, yet a strong one, too. Hubert had seen it there before, but he had never thought about it. He would not have thought of it now, if Alec had not gone over and looked at it. Then, as if moved by an impulse, he took it down and wiped the dust from it with his sleeve. "That's a picture of my mother, Bert," he said.

Bert took it awkwardly in his hand. He did not know what to say, and so he only made a mumble for reply. He held the picture before him, and examined it in an embarrassed way. It really made no impression on him, and he could not have told what the woman looked like. "She's dead—a long time ago," said Alec.

"She looks nice," muttered Bert, to say something.

"Hm." Alec took the picture and held it up and looked at it, then from it down to the boy's face, then back at the picture, then at the boy. His face was grave. He bit his lip thoughtfully, and turned away without saying anything. He hung the picture back in its place, and Bert felt relieved. He thought pictures rather silly things, and had never paid much attention to them. One of the boys at school had a camera, and it was sort of fun to have your picture taken while you were swinging, or leading the calf; but this having people's faces hanging on the wall, especially if they were dead people, was foolish. Hubert tried to think of Uncle Alec's mother as down in the ground and up in the sky at the same time; but he was not able to think of her as having any existence at all. She meant merely nothing. He was more interested in the old gun hanging on the wall, which had been Uncle Alec's grandfather's. That had more sense in it, Hubert thought.

Uncle Alec laughed when he saw the boy looking at

it; and showed him the gun again, and how it worked, and how the powder-horn worked, too, that hung beside it. Hubert liked to look at Uncle Alec's bead-work that the Indians had made, and a Chinese knife, that had belonged to some of the sailor McLeans, and other odd things, in boxes and on shelves. There was a feeling of being at home here, in spite of the fact that the sounds of house-work were Mrs. Gundersen's, and not his mother's.

"Do you like this house?" asked Alec.

"Yes. It's nicer than ours," answered Bert.

"Do you want to see it all?"

"Oh, yes, I'd like to." Hubert liked to peep into the rooms which were not in use.

On the ground floor, in a wing which was kept closed, there was a large room with a bedroom adjoining. In the two rooms were pieces of furniture, better than those in the rest of the house. They were of old dark mahogany. One or two of them were still in crates, in which they had arrived from New York State, after Alec's mother's death. The paper and the burlap had been pulled away in places, and a little sewing table with carved legs could be seen, and a desk with brass handles. There were barrels, too, which Alec said held dishes.

Upstairs was Alec's bedroom, with a big old-fashioned walnut bed, and a chest of drawers and a large looking glass; a wardrobe, a chair or two, and a table. The old lady's room was in the other part of the house, over the kitchen. There were other rooms which Hubert could look into, rooms partly furnished, or merely set out with crated pieces.

"What have you got all those for?" asked the boy.

"I hardly know," said Alec. "Those things belonged to my mother, and after she died, I hated to have 'em sold or lost, and so I've got 'em here. But God knows whether I'll ever use 'em or not." Hubert thought that a strange way to speak—as if furniture were so important that one might speak of God in connection with it; but the thought soon passed out of his mind.

They went on into the little room over the hall, at the front of the house. There were piles of old magazines in it, and old papers and books. There was an old secretary-on-legs there, too, a shabby piece, with its pigeon holes stuffed full of letters and papers. It all seemed mysterious and fascinating.

They went downstairs, and out to the barns. Bert walked close to Alec, and sometimes held his sleeve, or felt the man's hand on his arm or his shoulder. He was always at ease with Uncle Alec. He was never afraid that he would take a dislike to him and push him aside, or speak to him in a hard stiff way, as if the words were pulled out of him by wires. With his father, there was never any assurance of what would happen next. He would be all right for a day or two, and then he would be rough and almost savage. Sometimes he took Hubert by the arm and held him so tightly that the boy squirmed with pain; and once he had looked into his face in a wild way, as if he were trying to see something there. That was out in the field, and Bert had not wanted to go out with him after that. But with Uncle Alec you knew what to expect. He was always kind, with a warm teasing sort of manner, or else he was sober and didn't seem to hear what you said, but at such times he was kinder than ever.

Bert was sorry when Alec said, "Well, I suppose your mother'll be wondering what's become of you. I'll drive you home, and then I'll have to get to work."

The boy climbed out of the buckboard at the foot of the lane, and stood watching Alec till he was out of sight on the way to his farm again. Then Hubert walked slowly up to the house beside the lake, with the feeling that he had had a rather thrilling adventure.

* * * * *

The next Monday, Alec was to come over and help Willard. There would be only two days of work, because Willard had not much grain, since his larger crops were maize and potatoes.

The day was lowering, and there was haste to get the work done lest a storm should break. The two men came in at noon, silent and absorbed. Averil furtively studied Alec, with his fresh youngish face, tumbled brown hair which work only disordered, mouth always laughing while his eyes were grim; and Willard, with his black hair plastered down flat along his forehead, his eyes hollow, his lips tense. Alec had put on a clean blue denim jacket when he came to the table. Willard ate with his soiled shirt sticking close to his skin with sweat.

At supper Alec said, with his casual laugh, "If you can put me up here, I don't believe I'll go home. Nothing to go home for, you know—a bachelor like me. Bert wants me to go swimming with him."

Averil's heart gave a leap, but she was calmly pouring more tea for Willard. His hand, holding the cup toward her, jerked and splashed the hot tea. "Why, I guess we can, all right," he said.

"We'd get a good start in the morning, that way," said Alec; "and Bert and I could have our swim."

"You can sleep downstairs," said Averil. There was a bedroom across the hall from the "front room," facing the lake. It was beneath the room which Willard occupied. "If you have both windows open, you can keep cool."

"Oh, I'll be all right," said Alec. It was bold of him, thought Averil, to propose staying. But it was the natural thing to do, after all. Any neighbour, changing works, would have done it, if he were a bachelor, and had nothing to go home to but an old Danish housekeeper.

Alec and the boy went off with towels, for their swim, out beyond the hemlocks and the graveyard, to the point where they had had the picnic, the other day. There was a small beach there, with smooth pebbles and white sand, where the water gradually deepened, and did not shoot off into unfathomable depths, as it did in most places around the lake. Averil put away the supper things, and thought of the two, man and boy, plunging and gliding in the coolness, their bodies showing through the dusky water.

They came back in the twilight, laughing and taunting each other. Averil, spreading clean sheets in the downstairs bedroom, heard the voice of Alec, deep and quiet and vibrating, the voice of the boy, merry and teasing and shrill. "How happy they are together," she thought. "If only——"

"I'll teach you another stroke, the next time," Alec was saying.

They all sat for a while on the porch in the dark, Alec smoking and saying little. Averil had food to pre-

pare for the early breakfast, and she could not stay. Hubert went off to bed, and the two men sat with intermittent talk.

Averil came back. "Bed-time," she said. "I'm going. You men can stay up as long as you like."

"I'm turning in before long," answered Alec. "I must finish my cigar."

Willard did not go till Averil was shut in her room. Then she heard the sound of his going to his room, and the thud of his heavy shoes on the floor. Listening, she heard Alexander walking on the porch, and then heard him going to the bedroom under Willard's. Silence had settled on the house, except for the usual little tumult of the outdoor world, chirping and rustling, the tremolo of a flitting owl, the hooting of the night train four or five miles away.

Averil was sleepless, thinking. Alexander lay downstairs, only a few feet away from her, the wind blowing through the room, lifting the white curtain at the window beside his bed. Was he asleep? Of course he would be. He had worked hard, but not with the fury which possessed Willard Faraday. Perhaps he was awake, thinking of her under the same roof with him, thinking, thinking——

The growl of thunder came, so faint at first as to be merely conjectural, then more palpable and stern. The wind grew threatening. Averil, recalling the open windows downstairs, sat up at the edge of her bed. Willard slept so heavily that he was not like to hear the signs of storm. Rain in the summer came from the south and west, and if windows were not shut, it would sweep in over floors and furnishings. She longed and yet dreaded to go to the floor below, where the other man lay sleep-

ing. Surely he was sleeping the honest slumber of the harvester.

She put her bare feet down, reaching for her cotton dressing-gown, threw back her hair. Silently she felt for the door, turned the knob, and stepped into the narrow black hall. Downstairs she went, in the dark, first to the kitchen. The window slid down quietly. In the dining-room, the wind was billowing the curtains, and blowing the edges of newspapers in a rack upon the wall. The windows came down. She turned to go into the front room or parlour. For a second she stood, clasping her hands, wondering. If Alec should be awake—should hear——

A sound made her start. A glare of light was turned upon her, so that she stood in a nimbus of yellow glow. Her heart jumped. She gave a low cry of amaze. Then she knew that a man was standing at the stair door, and reason came to tell her that the light was from Hubert's flash, the birthday gift. "Willard—you?" she asked, trying to see the face that hovered above the glare.

"What are you doing down here?" asked Willard, choking, furious. She saw that the light trembled and wavered in his hand.

"Shutting the windows before it rains, of course," she answered, keeping her voice down to a whisper. "What did you think I was doing?"

"How could I know?"

"You ought to know. Where did you get the flash?" she said. There was terror in her heart, but she kept her voice steady.

"I had it in my room."

"Why did you have it there?"

"I thought I might need it."

"For what?"

"It looked like rain. I thought I might have to get up and shut the windows."

"You know I always shut them."

They stood there, facing each other in the dim surrounding glow. There was no sound from the bedroom on the ground floor. Rain was beating on roof and windows.

"Go on upstairs," Willard commanded in a tone inscrutable with rage or threat.

Averil crept up the dark stairs, her hands shaking as they felt along the wall. Would he go into Alec's room? Would he make a scene here in the middle of the night, a horrible accusing scene? Would he perhaps do some harm to Alec, rushing upon him in his bed, with cries and cursing and blows? How foolish she had been to go downstairs! She should have gone in and wakened Willard (he was, as it had proved, already awake), and asked him to go down and look after things. Or she should have let the rain pour in, sweep across the floors, flood the place, ruin everything. What difference would it have made, if this had been avoided?

She listened, frozen, on the stairs, for clamorous sounds below. But she heard only the slamming down of the three windows in the front room. Then there was the sound of feet shuffling along the carpet and up the stairs. The flare of the light struck up towards her as she stood on the landing. Still she could not see her husband's face. She went into her room and shut the door. She had forgotten the windows in Hubert's room, next her own.

She stood in the middle of the room, her hands pinched

together like twisted vises. How unutterably crazy she had been! Had she in her own secret soul, hidden even from herself, hoped that Alec would be awake and up, looking after the windows, and that there would be one swift passing, lovely touch of hands and lips? She did not know. She could only be unspeakably glad that she had borne the full semblance of innocence, that the windows in the dining-room were down, that the door to the parlour was closed, that Alec had not blundered out of his room urged by the storm and the sounds which she had made in shutting out the rain.

Willard was coming up the stairs, breathing hard. She waited for him to pass her door. But he had stopped. He had thrown the door open. The thunder had risen now to a low continuous rumble, and short flashes of lightning palpitated through the night. Willard could see her where she stood in the middle of the room. Will he kill me? she thought in sick distress.

"Averil!" His voice had in it more of anguish than of anger.

"Yes." She was still shaking with her fears.

"I thought—I thought——"

"What could you think, Will?" she said. "The windows had to be shut, and you sleep so like a log, I didn't think you'd wake to close them."

"Ah!" Suspicion leaped like fire in his voice. "You counted on my being asleep!" Then he added triumphantly, "I hadn't been asleep. How would I dare to sleep?"

"Dare?" Her own anger was flaring now. "Why not? What are you afraid of?"

"Averil!" His voice sank again to the note of suffering. "You know why."

"But I don't, Willard."

He took hold of her in the dark. The thunder was crashing; and the lightning became a beating continuous glare. His hot hands were on the cool flesh of her arms. A louder peal of thunder made him jump, but he tightened his hold upon her. "You know what I thought," he said, with his face close to hers. "You know. You know. If it had been true, I would have killed you both."

"Will! You're crazy," she cried, twisting herself away from him. "You don't know what you're saying."

"Yes, I do. I know too well. I'll kill you. I'll kill you both, if I ever find out that it's true."

She tried to answer him, but no sound came from her constricted throat.

There was a more vivid flash of lightning, and then a cry from the door, "Mama, mama, I'm afraid!"

Willard let go his wife's arm. Averil called out soothingly to Hubert, "Yes, yes, I'm here, Bertie. It's all right." He ran to her. "We were up, shutting the windows," she said. They had to raise their voices above the sound of the rain, pouring, hammering, thudding all around them.

Bert ran to his mother, seizing her hand. "I thought somebody was going to kill you," he said shrilly. He clung to her. The storm grew more vicious. It seemed for the moment as if the tempest might sweep away the house.

"It's all right," shouted Averil, above the din. "Your father's here. Nobody's going to kill me." She soothed the lad with her hands, caressing his hair. "We're all of us all right. I'll light the lamp, and you must stay with me until the storm is over." She struck a light.

"You needn't wait now, Willard," she said in the even tone of the wife speaking to the husband before their child. "You'd better go back to bed. Bert will stay with me until the worst of the storm is past. It's letting up already." Bert had cuddled into her rocking chair, drawing his feet up under his nightgown. Willard stood dishevelled, his mouth unsteady, shaping words which did not come. He had laid down the flashlight before he entered the room, and his empty hands were making aimless motions. Bert gazed at him wonderingly. "Don't wait, Willard," repeated Averil firmly, almost sharply. Willard turned and shuffled out of the room.

* * * * *

Morning came, clear and unflecked. Averil heard Willard downstairs. She rose and dressed, and went down to prepare breakfast for the two men, though she knew they must wait till the dampness had dried somewhat from the fields.

She heard Alexander moving about in his room, and then on the front porch. Willard was out at the milking. As she laid the table and skimmed the cream, she wished that Alec would come out to the kitchen before Willard came in. Perhaps he was purposely avoiding doing so, lest Willard should find them together. The smell of coffee pervaded the house. She was testing it in a cup when Alec came into the kitchen. His face was serious. He stood with his hands in his pockets, lounging against the door-jamb, in his deceptively care-free way. "What was going on last night?" he asked hurriedly.

Averil looked up from her work. "I went down to shut the windows when it began to rain," she said, "and

Willard followed me with the flashlight that you gave to Bertie."

"I gathered something of the kind." Alec looked at her meditatively. "You shouldn't have done it. You were afraid that I'd do something that would make trouble, and now you've done about as bad a thing as you could yourself."

"It was foolish," she confessed. "But I always do come down to see to the windows, and he sleeps so heavy." Alexander was still silent, gazing at her as if he did not see her. "Alec," she burst out, turning an appealing face to him, "won't you go away?"

"No." His face settled to grimness. "No, I won't."

"But you've always wanted to. You wanted to go to sea, or something." She twisted her fingers into the edge of her apron.

He smiled ironically. "I'm too old now. I'm thirty-six. Folks don't begin going to sea at that age."

"Well, but you might go somewhere. You'd like to travel. You could leave the farm for a while. You have plenty of money."

"I won't go," he repeated. "You might need me."

She shook her head. "Not as much as I need to have you go."

"I can't," he answered miserably. "I can't run off and leave you to stand it alone." She wanted to say that whatever happened she must stand it alone. There was no one, not even Alec, who could help. She remained quiet, passing from table to stove. "Averil"—his voice shook with sudden emotion—"can't we take things into our own hands? Can't we do something?"

"No." Her voice was low and broken. "He would never let us. I couldn't get free. He hasn't done any-

thing. He would kill us both before he would let me go free. You know we've talked about this so many times before."

"Yes." His shoulders drooped. "Well, anyway, I'll stay."

"I wish you'd go, Alec," she returned.

"No, you don't."

He went back to the front porch and sat down. He was there when Willard came in from the milking. "Where's Alec?" he asked, putting the pail on the table.

"Out in front somewhere, I guess," Averil answered indifferently. "You can go and see."

Willard sauntered around to the side of the house, where he could see Alec on the steps in a settled position, as if he had been there all the time. The two men spoke with the familiarity of long acquaintance. "Pretty bad storm," Alec said, "but it went off fast."

"Yeah. D'you hear us putting down the windows?"

"I heard something, but I was too sleepy to sense it. When it began to rain cats and dogs, I got up and put down the one in front."

"Good thing you could keep the other open. The rain don't come in from that side."

"Too wet to work for a while, ain't it?"

"I guess it is."

They sat down to breakfast, talking about the grain. Averil marvelled at the ways of men, their easy pretense of companionship in the midst of suspicion and dislike.

When they had gone, she heard Hubert coming down. She was glad that he had not been there at breakfast. It had been hard enough, without his innocent comments on what had happened in the night.

Willard was becoming more difficult than he had ever

been before. He had never dared to say as much to her as he had said last night, under cover of the storm. He had never put his thoughts into words. Now that they were shaped, expressed, they seemed more dangerous than they had been when veiled by reticence.

She was not really afraid of Willard's violence, not, at least, when she was able to reason about it. She knew that it was unlikely that he would do anything rash, even though he were torn by anger and hate: because he loved her, because he was a kind man at heart. But those terrible fits of wrath—she shuddered. It was hard to say what he might do in one of them. If only Alec would go away, Willard would subside, quiet his own fears, be himself again. They would go on with their life. Empty perhaps it would be; but she had Hubert, and nobody could take him away.

She would speak to Alec again about going; but then, she was pretty sure that he wouldn't go. Back in the shadowy region of her own motives and desires, the region which in all of us is screened by self-deception, she knew that she could not bear to have Alec go, that she did not want him to go, that life would be more unbearable than it was now, if he were gone out of the circle of her knowledge, and out of her reach.

CHAPTER V

WILLARD had been over to Libbie Hunt's, to take her ten pounds of sugar, which he had bought for her in the village. She was canning, and had miscalculated her needs.

"What do you think?" he said to Averil, as he came in through the kitchen. "Libbie Hunt has taken Daddy Gleason."

"Taken him?" answered Averill. "What do you mean? Has he gone to stay with her?"

"Yes, that's it," said Willard. "He was sitting on the front porch, as happy as you please, and she followed me out to the gate and told me about it."

"Mira Prentice 'll be as mad as hops," commented Averil.

"She is. She's foaming at the mouth," chuckled Willard. He was one of many who had long-standing scores against Mira Prentice. "But she can't do anything. The old man's been sharp enough to hold on to what little money he's got, and he can do just as he pleases."

Averil stood, dust-cloth in hand, listening and considering. "Well, I'm as glad as I can be that he's out of that place," she said. "Mira thought she had him there for life. How did it happen? Do you know?"

"Well, it seems that Libbie went over to Mira's on some errand, I don't know what, and Mira was talking

up to the old man pretty sassy with that razor of a tongue that she's got, and makin' him eat something he didn't like. And he looked so kind of neglected and half-starved, Libbie says, that she just couldn't stand it. She up and says to him, 'Well, Mr. Gleason, how'd you like to come an' live at my house?' And the old fellow jumped at the chance. She hadn't more'n half meant it—just kind of spoke up without thinking—but when she saw how keen he was to go, she just bundled his traps into a suit case and a box or two, and carried him off, Mira flying at 'em like a settin' hen."

"It takes Libbie Hunt to do a thing like that," smiled Averil. "The rest of the neighbours have been pitying the old man for a year or two, and yet nobody had the courage to interfere. How in the world can she spend the time and money to take care of him?"

"He's been paying Mira two dollars a week," said Willard.

"Yes, I know, but that won't pay for what he eats, let alone anything else," answered Averil. "And Libbie, with all she has to do——"

"I guess she'll manage," said Willard. Like most men, he secretly believed that women had little or nothing to do. Another person more or less in the family hardly counted.

Caddie confirmed the report when she came over the next afternoon. "Yes, mother brought Daddy Gleason home with her," she announced in reply to Averil's question. "She said he looked exactly like an old dog that's been beaten, and it almost broke her heart. He's an awfully nice old man, but Mrs. Prentice has been as mean to him as she could be, thinking that he hadn't any other place to stay, and that nobody would want to

bother with him. And she knew he was terribly scared of being sent to a home, or something."

"He has a little money," said Averil.

"Just a little bit," Caddie replied. "It isn't enough to keep him or provide for him, mother says, if he tried to live alone. He's going to give her the two dollars a week that he gave Mrs. Prentice, but what we do for him we'll just be giving to him. We've put him in the room downstairs off the kitchen, where we can look after him."

"It seems pretty hard, when your mother has so much to do," hesitated Averil.

"Well, I told mother I'd do most of it—looking after his room, and what he eats, you know; and she's going to keep his clothes washed and mended. We can get along, I guess. He isn't sick, you know. He's really awfully strong, except that he has some kind of spells once in a while." Caddie spoke with girlish earnestness. "He's a real nice old man," she said, "and I just hope we can make him happier than he has been over there at Mrs. Prentice's."

"I guess you can all right," responded Averil, "but it's kind of hard on you and your mother." She felt a little guilty that she had not thought of taking the old man herself. Or Alec might have done it. Everybody seemed to take it for granted that he had to stay at Mira Prentice's just because he'd gone there when his daughter died three years ago, herself an old woman. "Well, Libbie Hunt has courage," Averil thought; "more than the rest of us, and sense, too. But we all ought to turn in and help her a little. I'll make some nice new shirts for him, and I know Alec 'll give him some shoes." She went upstairs to rummage out some socks and underclothes which she could mend and send over by Caddie.

Libbie Hunt was rather surprised and alarmed at what she had done, but she consoled herself with the assurance that she was right, and that Daddy Gleason had really had to be rescued from the clutches of Mira Prentice. She liked the old man, too, and he would be company when the children were away. It would not be long now till John-Benjoy would be starting off for school.

Libbie thought a great deal about Carraline, rapidly developing from childhood to very young young-womanhood. "I don't see what chance I can give her," she told herself. "There ain't a cent of money to do with, and it ain't likely that her father 'll ever be able to help any of us. Poor Ben! and poor Caddie! A girl likes to have a few good times, and some pretty clothes, and a chance to see different kinds of people. But I honestly don't see what I can do." She turned things over in her mind, when she could not sleep, on these magic summer nights. "The only thing I can do," she concluded on every such occasion, "is to give her the best training I can, out of what little I know, and let her get along as best she can, for herself."

On one of these mornings, Elizabeth and Carraline were up early, working in the garden. "Dishes and such things can wait," said Libbie. "The morning is the time to get the garden work done." The garden was their source of life, almost, for from it they drew nearly all their yearly sustenance.

The old man, Mr. Gleason—it had been privately agreed that none of the Hunts should call him Daddy Gleason—was entertaining John-Benjoy on the back porch, with willow whistles, cat's cradles, and other forms of amusement suited to the very old and the very young.

There had been a long silence, during which the

mother and daughter, crouching on burlap bags, had worked swiftly at the insolence of weeds, the last perhaps, as Libbie said, that they might have to deal with that summer.

Suddenly Caddie looked up, pushing her old straw hat back from her forehead. Her eyes were clear and shy. "Mother, what is being in love?" she asked.

Libbie gazed at her across the rows of beets. Caddie bent to her task again. "Being in love?" Libbie considered gravely. She was always careful not to take a frivolous tone with Carraline on serious subjects. To Libbie, love was a serious subject, none more so. "Why, it's caring for someone a whole lot," she answered slowly; "more than anyone else in the world."

"Caring for—a man?" asked Caddie tentatively.

"Mm—why, yes, that's the way we usually speak of it. Of course we care a lot for other people, too, but——"

"I see," said Caddie. Then: "Why should one care for a man so much—a man that you haven't known very well, that isn't of your own family, that doesn't belong to you? I don't see why."

Libbie looked blank. "Well, it does seem queer," she confessed. "I suppose it's because he's nicer than anyone else."

"Nicer?" Caddie raised her eyes. "They can't all be nicer," she said.

Libbie smiled wryly. "The women think they are, I guess," she answered cautiously. "Each woman thinks her man is the nicest. She does at first, anyway," she added to herself, bending over the row of beets.

"But they must find out sometime that they aren't," persisted Caddie, with unconscious cynicism. "Do you suppose Mrs. Hendricks thought that Mr. Hendricks was

nicer than anyone else?" The girl's nose wrinkled. "Did Mrs. Faraday think that Willard Faraday was the nicest? Did *you*, mother—did you think——"

"Hush," said Libbie, a dull red flush coming over her face in the shadow of her blue-print sunbonnet. "You must be careful what you say, Caddie."

"Well," the girl sulked, "I want to know things, mother. When you begin to grow up, you want to know about things. Other people have been living a longer time, and they've learned things already; but when you're growing up, there's a time when you have to learn, too."

"That's so. I know that's so," Mrs. Hunt admitted. "I want you should get things as straight as you can. But on some things, people differ. Some think one thing, and some another. But, on the whole," she continued thoughtfully, "I guess most things are sort of settled. What is it that you want to know?"

"Well, about being in love," frowned Caddie, pausing with her hands among the leaves. "There's more to it than just thinking a person is nice, and caring a lot for them, isn't there?"

"Perhaps," Mrs. Hunt scratched the ground thoughtfully with her trowel. "That's the foundation of it, you might say. But—yes, there is more, dear, but I don't know as I can tell you what it is. It's caring a great deal—caring terribly, I guess I mean; and wanting to give the person just the most good there is in the world, wanting to do all you can for them, standing by them, no matter what happens—and wanting to marry them," she went on in a lower tone. "I guess I'd better tell you that, too. It's wanting to marry them."

Caddie sat breathless, crouched on her heels. Her

eyes were on the willow trees, away down in the meadow. "And what is getting married, mother?" she asked.

Mrs. Hunt shifted her position. "Well," she said reluctantly, "it's having a minister go through a ceremony—you know that."

"Oh, yes, I know *that*."

"And living together after that time—going on living together."

"Of course I know that, too. People can't separate after that, can they?"

"Not very well." Libbie was digging up lusty weeds with relentless vigour.

"But there's something more, isn't there?" said Caddie, with puzzled insistence.

"Mm—well, it's being very close to each other in everything," Libbie answered in her wholesome, matter-of-fact tone, "the closest that it's possible, you know. When you love a person very much, then you want to share everything with them—not keep back anything."

"Yes, it ought to be like that," said Caddie.

"You'll know more about it after a while," said Mrs. Hunt. "I don't know as it's necessary for you to know it all at once. These things sort of come to a person. And don't go asking other people," she warned the girl. "Come to me if there's anything you think you must know."

Caddie was absorbed in thought for a long time. "I suppose you can tell for sure, when you care for anyone like that?" she inquired.

Libbie considered again. "Usually," she said. "Yes, I guess you always can. But sometimes you think you've found the right one, when you haven't. You want to be real careful, and then you won't make any mistake."

"Do people make mistakes about it?" Caddie was wide-eyed.

"Sometimes they do."

"And marry someone they don't care such an awful lot for—that they don't want to share everything with?"

"Yes, I guess I'll have to tell you the truth," returned Libbie grimly. "They do, a good many times."

"Then you can't be *sure*." Caddie spoke with disappointment. Her eyes clouded and her chin was almost quivering.

Libbie was perplexed as to how to answer. She had her code, and her opinion, but she could not put them into words which would satisfy her. "I guess when it's real, you know for sure," she said. "But lots of people can't care that way forever, it seems. There isn't enough to 'em. Being in love is such an awful big thing—it's too much for some people. They ain't big enough for it. I always say—to myself, I mean; I don't talk about these things much to anybody else—I always say that it takes a person with a big soul to really *love*. A lot of little-souled people don't know anything about it."

"I see," responded Caddie dubiously, as if she did not see.

Libbie continued her work, in deep contemplation. "I guess the best thing that anybody can keep in mind is something that it says in the Bible," she said at last.

"What's that?" asked Caddie, raising her head.

"*'The spirit is all—the flesh profiteth nothing.'* It may not be in exactly those words, but that's what it means."

"What *does* it mean?" asked the girl.

Mrs. Hunt answered slowly, weighing her words. "It means that, after all is said and done, it's what you think,

what's in your mind, in your soul, that really counts; that the body isn't the real thing in life—it isn't the real person; that there's more *to* us than that. Do you understand?"

"Maybe," answered Caddie. "I think I do."

"You see," the mother went on, elucidating her subject with conviction and yet with diffidence, "it isn't how one looks, or how big or how little he is, or whether he's whole or crippled, or tall or short, or who his father was, or where he came from; it's what he *is*, what his mind is, that his soul is——" Elizabeth Hunt floundered.

"Yes, mother, I can see that," cried Caddie joyfully. "I can, honestly."

"You want to think of it often," said her mother. "When you get to thinking that a person's looks count for an awful lot, or his body, or his ancestors, or his surroundings."

"Yes, I see," Caddie repeated. "A person could be awfully nice, and not look nice, or he could come from queer people, and still be all right to marry."

"It's especially true when it comes to marrying," said Libbie Hunt. "The body isn't what counts, at all."

"Uh-huh," replied the girl comprehendingly. Her fingers fumbled among the weeds. She was not thinking what she was doing. She was thinking how sometime she would be in love—with a man, a kind and wonderful man. He might not be good looking at all; he might be really plain (Caddie hoped that he wouldn't), or he might be one-armed or hunch-backed (Caddie prayed that he might not), but if she loved him, it would make no difference to her what he looked like, or where he came from. She would *know* that she loved him, and she would stand by him no matter what happened, and want

to give him everything that she could, and do everything for him that she could, and make him perfectly happy.

Up and down the long rows she went, as in a dream, hardly noticing the hot sun on her shoulders, nor the ache in her arms. Her mind was full of visions, half acknowledged, clouded with shyness and with innocence, full of mystery and loveliness. She started as from a trance when her mother spoke to her about some trivial thing.

Libbie scrutinized the girl's face wistfully. She felt very solemn. "Oh, I hope I've told her the right thing," she was saying to herself. "She's a dear girl, and I wouldn't want her to get wrong notions." She sighed, feeling a pang at her mother-heart. "It seems kind of sad, somehow, to see 'em growing up and learning what there really is to life!"

* * * * *

Time was going on swiftly now, and summer had emerged into autumn. Bert was in school again—but there were always Saturdays. Potato digging was nearly over; corn husking was coming. Willard and Alec had worked hard on their respective farms. Crops and prices were promising.

One Saturday Willard was taking a load of potatoes to Prattsville, the county seat, nine miles away. He started early, and would be back before nightfall. In the middle of the forenoon, Alexander McLean called up on the telephone. He wanted to speak to Bert. He never talked to Averil over the telephone, except in the most perfunctory and guarded way, and seldom at that; because all the country lines were "party" lines, and everybody listened in to hear what everybody else was saying.

"Oh, say, Bert," said Alexander, his voice full and suave on the wire, "why can't you and I have an outing together? It's a great day, but there's no telling how long such weather will last. Want to go?"

"Yes, yes, of course I do." Bert was always awkward at the telephone. "But where—what——"

"We'll go out in the woods. I'll meet you at the log house at three o'clock. Ask your mother if that's all right."

Bert left the receiver swinging, and went to the kitchen door to tell his mother. She looked disturbed. "I'd like it awful well," urged Hubert,

"Tell him you can go, then," she said unwillingly. "Did he say anything about taking a lunch?"

Bert shook his head. "I guess we'll be back for supper. He didn't say."

"Well." Averil had consented, though with apprehension. Bert scuttled back to the telephone.

That afternoon he started out early, so that he might be sure not to keep Uncle Alec waiting. He was resolved not to stop at the Hunts', lest he should be overpersuaded and lured into delay. There were always so many things to talk about. The old man, Mr. Gleason, was raking dry maple leaves in the long front yard. His shoulders were hunched a little, but he wielded the rake with quick strong motions. "Hello," he called out happily to Bert. He looked clean and well cared for, and his blue eyes were beaming with satisfaction. Even Bert could not help seeing how happy the old man was to be at Libbie Hunt's.

Bert called back "Hello!" and remarked on the size of the pile of leaves in the driveway.

"Got yours all raked yet?" asked Mr. Gleason, proud of his work.

"Not all. I'm leaving some till to-morrow."

"Oh, that's Sunday. Better rake 'em to-day," said the old man. He felt proud to be so active, so forehanded, so virtuous in his regard for the Sabbath. Bert backed away from the fence. "Caddie's pulling the carrots," the old man told him.

"I got to go on. I got to meet somebody," said Bert. He felt important, meeting Uncle Alec in that way. The old man nodded, snatching at the leaves with his wooden rake, and rustling them into a pile.

Bert was early, after all, and had to wait a long time for Alec at the log house, a deserted cabin set where a grass-grown road branched off from the highway.

But after a while, there was Alec striding along in corduroys and flannel shirt, with a gun over his shoulder. He walked as if getting over the ground were a process of nature, involuntary and unnoticed, like breathing. "Hey, there!" he called, laughing. "Been waiting long?"

"Not so awful," answered Bert. "But I guess I was early."

"Guess you were. I'm just on time." Alec pulled out his watch. He wore a short wool jacket, and a soft felt hat, shapeless with age, but he seemed to Bert impressively well dressed. "We'll go along the Chain," he said. "You don't get over there very often."

"No," said Bert.

"Well, we'll see what's over there," smiled Alec.

They walked down the grassy road, between neglected fields. In ten minutes, the lusted surface of a lake appeared. It was the first of the Chain. Bert had been there before, a good many times if they were all counted;

but not so often that the lake did not seem new to him on this autumn afternoon. The warm sun beat down upon him, but the cool wind took away the sting of the heat. White clouds billowed along the sky. Across the lake a tamarack swamp showed misty blue.

They turned in along the edge of the marsh, where twisted gentians stood up stiffly, and iris pods were dry and slitting. On a harder knoll a hickory tree showed its dark round fruit. The squirrel instinct of the boy would hardly let him pass.

Up a small rise in the road they went, and then were on a flat wooded space which stretched away toward the Big Lake. Here the trees were mostly maples and butternuts and bass-woods, whose leaves turn to pure gold at the touch of frost. Looking up through the laced branches and the yellow leaves already thinned, Hubert could see the sky, bluer than it had been before.

Under foot were the fallen leaves and the jewel-colours of red and coral and orange mushrooms. Here and there a vine, blood-red, climbed a tree and hung along the boughs, dripping its sanguinary foliage far down.

"This is the finest time of the year," said Alec. "Can you see how wonderful it is, lad?"

"Uh-huh, I guess so," answered Bert, gruffly, because he felt so shy about things that were beautiful.

Alec seemed to understand. "It's the kind of thing that there's no use in talking about," he said. Bert looked up at him, and his face was still and brooding. The boy dared not interrupt the man's thoughts with speech. They went on, bound for nowhere in particular, treading the gold carpet of the woods. Sometimes Hubert scuffled in the leaves, to see the sun glint upon them through the boughs.

After a while, a faint sound came to his ears, above the flittering of the foliage in the wind, and above the screaming of jays and the tapping of nut-hatches on the boles. Hubert heard it again. "What is that?" he asked breathlessly.

Alec stopped and listened. "It's a partridge," he said, his face alert. "It's over that way. Let's go as still as we can."

They crept along under the branches, stopping frequently to crouch and listen. They came at last to an open place where in times past two or three trees had been brought down by wind or lightning. Here the drumming was loud and insistent. "Ssh," whispered Alec. He held his gun in his hand. "See her, Bert?" he said.

At first Bert could not make out anything except a huge fallen tree trunk with broken branches. But in a minute he could see something moving and then the regular beating of wings, from which came the muffled sound of drumming. "She's almost the colour of the log," whispered Bert.

Alec raised his gun to his shoulder. Hubert held his breath. But a pang shot through him which was almost like the lead which was in a moment to pierce the sentient creature beating out the last of life before him. "Oh-h!" he gasped. Was it too late? He had wanted to say, "Oh, don't!" but he had not been able to speak.

Alec, without hearing him, had already lowered his gun. "Shall we let her live, Bert?" he said thickly. "I can't kill a thing like that, out here in the open, enjoying the sun and the air and the woods as much as we do. Hadn't we better let her go on living?"

Hubert gave a cry of relief. "You bet," he said, louder

than he intended. "I was awful scared you was going to kill her!"

The bird, hearing the voices, stopped the beating of its wings, and stood transfixed; then in a flurry of feathers was off on wing, floating silently away like a shadow into the thicker woods. "I hope she'll make the most of her chance," muttered Alec. "The next fellow's heart may not be so soft!"

Hubert rejoiced openly, in exclamations which had no definite wording.

Alec looked sheepish but pleased. "I'm glad you feel the way I do, kid," he said. "I'm not much for killing things. But it wouldn't do to tell anyone what ninnies we are."

"No," agreed Bert. There was no use in telling people everything you knew. He had found that fact out before this.

They turned back toward the lake, and walked along exuberantly. Each was exulting at having given its life to this creature of the woods. "Swell hunters, we are," laughed Alec. "Ain't we the Hiawathas? Oh, well," he added, "I guess we can do as we like when we're off on an excursion all by ourselves." There was a suggestion of intimacy in his tone, an affectionate welding of the two that made Bert take delight in this companionship. "I brought sandwiches," said the man, as they drew near the lake. He reached into the sagging pocket of his jacket. "Folks are always hungry in the woods."

Hubert felt suddenly hungry, though he had not thought about the matter before. They were now on the bank of the lake, which lay below an abrupt slope of thirty feet. The banks were slippery with brown pine needles, and the warm scent of pine was in the air, the

pitchy smell which is the sweetest aroma of the woods. "Gee! Ain't it great?" said Bert, sniffing.

They sat down on a log, and Alec unrolled the paper parcel which contained the snack. There were thick sandwiches of meat and cheese. As he ate, Hubert sent pine cones spinning down the slippery banks, or shied pebbles out upon the water. "This lake is different from ours," he said.

"It's a good deal higher," said Alec. "It lies on higher ground. Did you know that?"

"No, I never knew about it," answered Bert, accepting another sandwich.

"Your lake is down on a different level," Alec explained. "If these on this Chain should have a channel cut through, the water would rush in and cover all your father's land—and then where'd you be?" He laughed, taking another big bite of bread and meat.

Bert looked startled. The idea was a strange one. "You mean, the water would run right out over our land?"

"Yeah," replied McLean. "That's just what I mean. You see, there's only a little bit of a place that separates them, separates the Chain from your lake, I mean. It could be cut through."

Bert pondered, staring at the blue water below him. "How do you know it would drown our land?" he asked incredulously.

"I can see for myself," returned Alec. "I know the place where the lakes come the nearest together. You see, your house and the land around it, and most of your father's farm are not very high above the water."

"I know that," Hubert conceded, still holding his sandwich in his hand.

"Your lake is fed by springs, and not by rivers, and it hasn't any outlet," said McLean. "It's all right if it's let alone. That house has stood there for sixty or seventy years, I guess; but if the water should come through from the other side, it would be a bad day for all concerned." Hubert looked so alarmed that Alec began laughing again at the sight of the boy's face. "You needn't be scared," he hastened to say. "It won't ever happen. I just thought you'd like to hear about it."

"Funny I never heard about it before," grumbled Bert.

"Hardly anybody knows it, I guess," answered Alec.

"What people don't know won't hurt 'em."

They ate, chatting of other things. Alec had a way of speaking to the boy as if they were equals. Hubert liked such treatment, which was different from that which he received from anyone else. Alec took out his pipe and tobacco, and sat with a blue haze round his head, his hat pushed back, his cheeks red, his hair showing brown under the rim of his hat. He was like a big friendly boy; but it would take only an instant to change him to a stern and gloomy man.

They sat a long time; or at least Alec did. Hubert was up and down, running to watch a squirrel circling an oak tree, with bitter cries of indignation at this human invasion; or listening to bird calls; or marvelling at the coarse laughter of a pair of loons swimming and diving in the lake.

The man and the boy had another tramp into the woods before they started for home. Alec looked at his watch. "Getting late," he said. "I'm a free man. I don't have to account for myself; but it's different with you." He did not seem to be joking.

"I guess I'm all right," Bert made sturdy answer. He

did not want to act scared, nor to whine about things; but he had thought all at once of what his father would say if he were late. Why should his father care if he were out with Uncle Alec? He might know that Alec would not let anything happen to him. Perhaps he wouldn't be angry. Perhaps it would be all right. Even if it should be a trifle unpleasant, he was glad he had had this afternoon. He could stand a lot to pay for it. But he cringed, too, when he thought of Willard Faraday's face distorted by anger.

They were now at a considerable distance from the road. They trudged along in the dulling splendour of the golden forest. When they came to the road, Alec said, "I wonder if I'd better go home with you, Bert?"

"Oh, I guess not," answered the boy quickly. "You've got quite a ways to go, an' there's no use in bothering with me."

McLean stood considering. "I don't want to muddle things," he said. "I guess, on the whole, it would be better if I didn't go." He let his gaze fall upon the boy with an anxious affectionate look. "I believe it's better this way." His face cleared. He stood watching as the boy went down the road, and disappeared behind the hazel bushes. With a long sigh, he turned, shouldered his unused gun, and walked away toward home.

* * * * *

Hubert, trudging home in the late afternoon, was so happy with the remembrance of the hours which he had just spent that he hummed little tuneless airs as he went along. Sometimes he stopped, stricken with other remembrances, but he reassured himself and went on.

When he arrived at home, Willard was not to be seen.

Hubert went quietly into the house, feeling the desire to get to his mother. She was clearing the table, but his plate was as yet not removed. "You're late, Bertie," she said. "Your father has been wondering where you were."

"Aw, I was all right," he replied. His face was still shining with the happiness of the uneventful afternoon. "Uncle Alec wouldn't let anything happen to me."

"I don't think it was *that*," said his mother in a low tone.

They heard the step of Willard at the back door. He came through the shed and the kitchen, and stood in the door, glowering. "So you're back, are you?" he said, bending his gaze on the lad. "Been off in the woods, have you?"

"Yes, I been over on the Chain," answered the boy.

"With Alec?"

"Yes."

"Funny that Alec hasn't got anything to do but go trailing around in the woods with a boy," commented Willard. His nostrils trembled; his lips twitched.

"We had a bully time," said Hubert, feeling that he was defending the good judgment of Uncle Alec. "We was hunting."

"Get anything?" asked Faraday.

Bert shook his head. "Mm-h. We saw one or two things, but they got away."

"Great hunters you are," said Willard. Averil was standing behind him, her face anxious. For the first time, Hubert noticed furrows in her forehead and around her mouth. He did not say anything. It seemed as if anything he said would be wrong, with his father looking like that. He slid into his chair at the table. "You

ought to go without your supper," said Willard, as if he were seeking a pretext for his wrath; "coming home late like this. Do you expect your mother to wait on you, when you come home any time you please?"

"It isn't very late, Will," interposed Averil faintly. "We had supper early, you know."

Faraday shot her a glance over his shoulder. "That's right," he said, "stick up for him. Let him do anything he likes, with the rest of us standing round like black niggers." He took a step forward. Bert, looking up, saw him, towering like a thundercloud above him. He winced, and a tremor ran through his shoulders. "You had no business going out like that," Faraday went on. "You can find enough to do here on the farm. I want you to say you'll never do it again."

It was a ridiculous attack and an absurd request. They all knew that. The idea of making the boy promise that he would never go off the farm was too foolish for contemplation. Hubert hastily reviewed the implications of it. He could not agree to such a thing. He would not promise not to go out with Alec McLean again. He sat dumb. "I want you to say it, sir," repeated the angry man. "Say it, say it," he commanded, leaning over the boy.

Hubert dared not look up now. He kept his eyes down to his lap, and his lips pressed together. He shook his head.

"You won't?" Willard said in a low voice that was more terrible than his shouting. "I say, you young scandal, that you're not going out like this with Alec McLean, setting the whole neighbourhood to laughing. I won't stand for it. Do you hear?"

Hubert made nothing of the words, except that he was

not to go out with the man whom he adored. "Uncle Alec——" he began, with a choke in his throat.

Faraday jumped and gave a loud cry. "Uncle Alec! Uncle Alec! I'll *Uncle Alec* you." He seized the boy by the collar, and jerked him out of his chair. Averil uttered a stifled scream. Faraday gave another jerk, and the sound of rending cloth was heard. Shaking and pushing the lad with his knee, Faraday pulled him out into the kitchen. "I'll *Uncle Alec* you," he was saying over like a machine. He struck the boy two or three times, heavily, with his hand. Averil, panting and screaming, plucked at his arm, calling "Willard, Willard, you don't know what you're doing. Stop! Stop!" Hubert had not uttered a sound. She tried to force herself in between the angry man and his victim, but Faraday pushed her off roughly. Still she fought at him with her hands, to save the boy from his violence. Faraday had begun jerking and striking him again. "You'll kill him. Stop! Stop!" Averil shrieked, her voice shrill with terror.

Faraday loosed his hold on Hubert so suddenly that the boy staggered and fell backward. He put out his hand to save himself, and struck it against the hot iron of the kitchen stove.

Willard had turned against Averil, and had raised his arm to strike. "Willard!" she begged. He went limp; his arm dropped; he stood weakly for a moment, then turned and went out at the back door. He sank down on the stone step, and hid his face in his hands. Averil ran to Hubert. "Are you awfully hurt, dear?" she cried. "Are you hurt? Are you burned?"

The boy was shaking all over, in a fit of nervous laxness. His face was white. He stood shaking and blink-

ing and gasping, holding up his hand, on which a dreadful red mark had risen. Averil groaned. She put her arm about him, and led him into the other room and made him sit down in the big Boston rocker. He was trembling, not so much with fear as with shock, and his lips were quivering. But even in his misery he remembered that he could tell Uncle Alec that he had not whined nor cried.

Averil went to bring soda and cloths for the burned hand. The eyes of the boy were dark with suffering. "Do you suppose he'll go after us again?" he asked in a whisper.

His mother shook her head. She was pale and agonized, but her hands were steady as she bound up the painful palm. "No, I don't think so," she said. "He's sorry already for what he's done."

"Sorry!" There was scorn in the lad's whisper. But just then a kind of dizziness came over him, and a ringing in his ears, a blackness before his eyes. His head lolled against the high back of the rocking chair. When the wave of dizziness had passed, he opened his eyes upon his mother's frightened face. "I'm all right," he said, when his lips could move.

She put her cheek against his, her eyes closed. "Oh, my child, my beautiful child," she murmured. "What shall I do to help you?"

"I'm all right, ma," he repeated, trying to speak sturdily. "I guess I want something to eat." It seemed a long time since he and Uncle Alec had sat on the log in the woods and eaten their little packet of sandwiches.

Averil hurried to the kitchen to get milk for the boy. Willard had left the door step, and was walking about in the yard, his head down. Averil brought milk and

bread and meat from the kitchen, and Hubert ate and drank. "I feel better," he said. But now the injured hand was beginning to burn and ache. In a few minutes the pain was unbearable. He started up and began walking around, holding the arm with his well hand, and uttering exclamations of pain. He ran out upon the porch and paced up and down, his face puckered with torture. His mother stood biting her lips and holding her hands tight together, horrified at her inability to save her child from suffering.

Hubert threw himself face downward on the settle. He heard a step. Willard was beside him, putting a clumsy hand on his shoulder. "Bert, Bert," he said in a stifled voice. "I'm sorry. I didn't know what I was doing."

Bert twisted his head to look up, but there was aversion in his look. "Aw, it's all right," he said gruffly. He felt sorry for a man who had to go about begging people's pardons. But it wasn't all right. Nothing could ever make it all right.

Willard was still standing over him awkwardly. "Half the time I don't know what I'm doing," he said. "I feel so—so——"

"So what?" asked the boy, curiosity penetrating his pain. He had a glimpse of the agony of the man, which seemed no less than his own. He wondered dimly what it could be that made a man act like that.

"So—I can't tell you—so terrible." Willard stooped and curved his arm across the boy's shoulders, trying to caress him. Bert cringed, but did not shake it off. He felt vaguely sorry for his father—sorry that anyone could be so unjust, so irrational, so cruel. But he felt hard, too, and contemptuous.

Willard went away and sat on the steps, dejected, shamed. Averil came and went without noticing him, trying to find remedies for the torture in the boy's hand. The dusk came down, chill and sharp, with a white mist standing over the lake. In the front of the house the acacias were almost bare; the sedges along the shore were dry and brown, but the grass retained its colour, almost startlingly green. "Better come in the house," said Averil. She urged Bert into the front room, holding to his elbow, lest he should become dizzy again.

She had lighted the lamp in the homely parlour. Bert sat staring at the what-not with the little trinkets that he liked—the bright china ornaments, two shepherd girls in lacy dresses; a shell-covered box; a glass paper weight with gay mixed spots of colour inside. There was a fireplace, and Averil had started a tiny blaze with some old pasteboard and a few chips. Not many houses in that country had fireplaces, but this one had been built long ago by people from New England.

Bert held his burning hand out stiffly before him. The room looked strange to him, almost as if he were seeing it in a dream. If his hand didn't hurt him so, he thought, it would be nice here in the house, with the light and the fire, and the cozy sense of escape from the cold and mist outside. He moved his hand up and down, making as he did so a little "Ah-h, ah-h," rhythmically under his breath, an abortive bleat of pain which could take the place of tears.

All at once Averil, who had sat down for a moment on the sofa, burst out into sobbing, her arm held hard across her mouth. She rose thus and ran upstairs, the sound of her loud sobs suddenly cut off by the slamming of her door. Willard got up from the porch, and went

through the yard, toward the barn. The house was still. Hubert sat in a stupor before the fire. He seemed to see the blue and gold of the lake and the woods as they had looked that afternoon, and to hear the voice of Uncle Alec saying: "I guess we can do as we please, when we're out for a good time by ourselves." He was glad and proud that he had not promised never to go out with Uncle Alec again.

CHAPTER VI

GROWING boys develop irregularly, by fits and starts. Hubert Faraday developed more in the days following the experience with his father than he had done for a year. His mind was a turmoil of reactions—of feelings toward the members of the group in which he lived. His mother, now: the way in which she had suddenly gone out of the room, sobbing, with her arm across her mouth, had given him a dim boyish realization of what she suffered. It must be pretty bad, he thought, to have a man mean to you like that—to have him so queer and changeable, sometimes nice and sometimes terrible, to have him rough with the people in the house, and to see him threaten you with his arm up, as Willard had done. “I believe he would have hit her, if he hadn’t gone after me,” Bert said to himself.

He thought about what he would do if his father should ever strike Averil. “I’d—I’d——” he began. But what could he do? Willard was frightfully strong; a boy would have no chance at all with him. “I could call somebody—Uncle Alec, maybe—on the telephone,” he thought. But by the time Alec could get there, anything might happen. And Alec might not be in the house when he called, so there would be no help for a long time, if at all. He shuddered to think what would take place if Uncle Alec should be there when Willard should strike

Averil. That would be almost worse than anything else—a fight between Alec and Willard, both of them angry, and both of them so strong. It would be like two bears or lions fighting each other.

Hubert decided that if his father should strike his mother, and there were no one near to help, he would have to do something, himself. Perhaps he would have to shoot his father. There was an old revolver in the top drawer of the secretary. Most farmers kept some weapon in the house, for destroying marauding animals and protecting the household against a hypothetical foe.

Bert ventured to speak privately to his mother concerning these things. "If pa should hit you, what could we do, mama?"

Averil looked at him wanly. "I don't think he'll ever do that, Bertie," she said.

"But he almost did," the boy reminded her. "You know he almost did."

"I know," Averil conceded. "But he's so sorry that I don't think he'll ever do it again."

"But you can't tell," argued Bert. "Nobody knows when he's going to get awful mad about something."

"I guess we'll have to go on the supposition that he won't."

"I don't think that's any use," Hubert replied. "If there isn't anybody here to help, and he hits you, ma, I guess I'll have to shoot him."

Averil was scandalized. "Don't talk like that," she said sharply. "Of course you wouldn't do any such thing. What would you shoot him with?"

"With the old revolver that's in the top drawer, there. I've seen it lots of times."

Averil sat with her hands in her lap, thinking. Then she got up and went to the secretary, and came back with the weapon in her hands, held gingerly before her. "I don't know whether it's loaded or not," she said, "but I'm not going to take any chances. Come with me, Bertie. I want you to see."

Hubert, a little scared, followed her as she went out on the porch. The cold wind was blowing, and her gingham dress was whipped around her body as she stood there. Down the steps she went, and out to the shore, where the yellow sedges were. She tossed the revolver into the water. It fell with a splash, a bigger splash than his watch had made, Hubert thought. "There! Now we don't need to think about that any more," Averil said. Her black hair was blowing across her face. "Never let such a thing come into your mind again, Bertie," she warned him with severity.

Bert felt a mixture of relief and disappointment. Now he wouldn't have to do any awful thing if his father should get to acting up again; but a sense of helplessness went along with his relief. "But what'll we *do*?" he gasped.

"We'll just have to hope that we've seen the worst, little boy," his mother responded, "and that we won't have anything more to worry us." She added, "Better not tell Alec how you hurt your hand."

Bert looked down at his bandaged hand and wrist. "No." There were a good many things that one must not tell, either to his father or to Alec. He wrinkled his forehead, trying to remember what he might and might not say.

"If Alec should hear that Willard had been mean to you, he would be terribly mad," said Averil. "I don't

know what would happen. He thinks that everybody should always be good to children."

* * * * *

"How'd you hurt your hand?" asked Alec, the next time he saw the boy. Alec was driving into the lane, and Bert had run down to meet him.

"Oh, I burned it," said the boy carelessly. "It's getting all right now."

"Does it hurt you?" asked McLean, scowling.

"Naw, not much. It's getting better," Bert returned.

"How was everything when you got home, the other night?" Alec inquired, as if he had thought about the matter a good deal.

"We-e-ll," said Bert hesitatingly. He did not want to tattle, neither did he want to conceal things from Uncle Alec, who was always good to him, and never nagged or condemned him.

"Anybody mad?" asked Alec, looking through half-shut eyes at the boy, and holding his cigar away from his mouth.

"Pa was kind o' mad," said Bert, trying to be casual.

"Hm. Pretty rough, was he?"

"Oh, fair," said Bert.

Alec sat in the buckboard, looking at the boy. After a while he said, "I guess I'm better off not to know. I guess everybody's better off." He sat holding his cigar and staring at the ground. "God!" he said once or twice. The boy pretended not to have heard.

* * * * *

It was the wile of a woman that brought his secret

from him. Caddie Hunt was walking home with him from school. Earlier in the day she had asked him about his hand, but he had refused to answer her. Now she said, "I'll carry your lunch pail for you."

"Naw, I can carry it," he answered. But he handed it over when she insisted. It was easier when he did not have to carry that and his books beside.

"How *did* you hurt it?" asked Caddie with sympathy in her brown eyes.

"Put it against the stove," he said moodily.

"Don't you know any better than that?" She laughed softly, though with commiseration.

"Most of the time I do," he answered; "but this time I was pushed."

"Oh! Who pushed you?" cried Caddie. Her eyes were troubled.

Bert shook his head. "I'd better not tell."

"It was your father," said Caddie.

"How did you know?" Bert looked at her with surprise.

"Who else would it be?" said Caddie. "Your mother wouldn't do it, and there isn't anyone who would, except——"

"That's so," admitted the boy.

"What'd he push you against the stove for?"

"Well, I don't s'pose he meant to. He just gave me a shove, and I fell, and I couldn't save myself."

"Was he—hurting you?" asked the girl, in a shocked tone.

Bert nodded, and looked away across the fields. He felt sorry for himself, and glad to have this sympathy.

"How awful! But what had you been doing?"

"Nothing," the boy replied. "I'd just been out in the

woods with Alec McLean——” He went on to tell the circumstances of the accident.

“Whew!” Caddie made comment. “He gets awful mad, doesn’t he?”

Bert nodded again. “Folks don’t know it, though,” he said. “I didn’t mean to tell.” He knew his mother would not be pleased with his tattling. He made haste to find other things to talk about.

When Caddie got home, she went, as she always did, to tell her mother the day’s news. “Mr. Faraday knocked Bert against the stove, and he burned his hand awfully,” she announced.

“Who burnt his hand? Bert?”

“Yes. His father was hurting him, and he fell against the hot stove,” Caddie explained.

Mrs. Hunt frowned over the carpet rags which she was sewing. “What was he hurting him for? Had Bert done something?”

“No, not a thing. He’d just been out with Alec McLean, and when he came home, they’d had their supper, but it wasn’t really late, for they’d had such an early supper—Mr. Faraday wanted it early——”

“He’d been out with Alec, had he?”

“Yes, just out in the woods along the Chain.” Mrs. Hunt did not answer. She was sewing at her carpet rags. “It’s funny, isn’t it, mother?” persisted Caddie.

“Well, boys are tantalizing sometimes,” parried Libbie. “Bert may have said or done something that you don’t know about.”

“I don’t think so,” said Caddie decidedly.

“Well, I wouldn’t go round telling it if I was you,” Libbie answered. “The best rule is, to let other folks’ quarrels alone.”

"I suppose that's true," answered the girl. "But, anyway, I think Willard Faraday is *horrid*."

"Why, no, he isn't horrid, either," protested Mrs. Hunt. "He's all right in his way. He works hard and pays his debts, and minds his own affairs, and never does his neighbours any harm."

"I wasn't thinking of those things," said Caddie.

"You should be. There's been times when he's done a good deal for us. When Benjy was born, and your father was away, Willard came over every day for a long time, and looked after things for me—he and Alec both did. And Averil came and brought things to eat, and combed your hair, you remember, when you couldn't take care of it yourself. Willard brought Averil over in the buggy every day, when he had a million things to do himself, and it was hard for him to cut into his time that way. Maybe you don't remember all that."

"Oh, yes, I do now," said the girl slowly. "I—I wasn't thinking of things like that. I was just thinking how funny it was that Mrs. Faraday was married to him, and wondering whether she liked him or not."

"Well, I guess you ain't called upon to settle other people's marriages," Mrs. Hunt said with assumed asperity.

Caddie started, and looked hurt. "I wasn't trying to," she answered, going to hang away her wraps, which she had been holding in her hands. She was a bit dazed by her mother's unexpected sharpness.

After she had gone, Mrs. Hunt let her sewing fall into her lap. "It does seem queer how they got tied up together," she admitted to herself. "But I guess they would have got along all right—or as well as most folks—if it hadn't been——" She checked herself, for Libbie

Hunt was one of the conscientious people who try to control their thoughts as well as their words. "It's getting serious when he treats the boy that bad. I wish I could do something; but I feel pretty sure that the best thing I can do is to let other folks' business alone."

* * * * *

Willard Faraday had gone out to one of his fields to dig potatoes. But he was not working. He sat on an overturned potato-box, unmoving, his hands hanging down between his knees. He was staring before him, not seeing the grey sky and the denuded woods. Now and then he muttered. He was suffering anguish for what he had done to Hubert. His thoughts were unworded, but they were of this sort: Why can't I be good to the boy? He's a fine boy, as fine as anybody's. Anybody would be glad to own him. If only he cared more for me! But how can he care for me, when I treat him so? Why can't I control myself? Why can't I hide what I feel? Why can't I take things for granted, as other men do? If every man got to wondering, and tormenting himself about his wife and children, nobody could have any peace. No man can be *sure* of what his household hides. You have to have some common sense. You have to be a man, to get a hold on yourself and keep it. If you let yourself go, you'll do some damage, do something you'll be sorry for.

He was sorry now for what he had done. He'd give a million dollars if he'd never laid hands on the boy. What a fool he had been to lay a hand on him! The boy would never like him again. There was nothing he could do now to repair that damage. There was no bribe he could offer, no allurement or cajoling that would

win back what the passion of isolated moments had lost. And suppose everything were all right. Suppose he had been mistaken, and he had been ill-treating his own boy! What a fool, what a damned fool he was!

He rose, and dug into the ground with his potato fork, turning up the crumbling soil, the pink dirt-dimmed tubers, an occasional fat slug. The rows of potatoes lay drying in the wind. The slatted boxes stood ready to receive them. Bert ought to be out picking them up; but of course he couldn't pick up potatoes with a burned hand.

Then like a cloud, depression fell upon him again. He stood with his foot on the top of the fork, staring, thinking, thinking. By God, they ought to be killed. They all ought to be killed, the whole three. That was the only way to wipe it all out, to make it as if it had never been. They ought to be killed. A man who was a man would kill them all. If he were sure, of course. The thing was, to be *sure*.

Then he worked with frenzied energy, to crowd down his thoughts, to force himself to forget, to think of something else. There was the price of potatoes. They were going to be a dollar a bushel. If they were, a fellow with a lot of them to sell would feel pretty rich. He might get a second-hand car. It would do the whole family good to get out more. They were indoors too much. Averil, now, never got out anywhere—that is, hardly at all. She didn't seem to get invited much, and she didn't seem to want to go. She ought to mix up in church affairs more; that was the sort of thing that a woman ought to be interested in. As a rule, a woman was safe if she was mixing up in church affairs. They gave her something to do and something to think of.

But Averil didn't seem to care much for church. She had even said that the minister was silly, that he didn't know what people needed, that he didn't know anything about life. What did she know about life that the minister didn't know? What had she meant, when she said such a bold thing? That would bear looking into.

Here he was, back at the old question. How could he be *sure*? What was hidden in the secret places of Averil's life? The price of potatoes—a new roof on the big barn—a second-hand car—the church—Hubert—a fine boy—as fine as anybody's boy—never lay a hand on him again—not for a million dollars—— Confusion asserted itself once more in the mind of Willard Faraday.

* * * * *

Alec McLean had been to Prattsville, nine miles away, selling a load of potatoes, and he had bought a pair of stout winter shoes for old Mr. Gleason, and a pair of goloshes to go with them. McLean had gradually taken upon himself the responsibility of the old man's clothes.

There was a drizzling rain which would presently be snow. Alec drove into the yard at the Hunt place, and left his horses standing. He saw Caddie coming out of the chicken house, where she had been feeding the fowls their hot mash before they went to bed. She had an old grey cape over her head and wrapped around her shoulders. Only the bright serious face of the girl showed, with a wisp or two of hair curling on her forehead. The hand that held the cape together in front was red and chapped.

"Hello, Carraline," said Alec, in his affable way.

"Good evening, Mr. McLean," Caddie replied. It

pleased her to be spoken to as if she were something more than a child. "I'm glad you call me Carraline. I think Caddie is a horrible name."

"It isn't as nice as the other," Alec agreed. "And you're getting to be so much of a young lady that you ought to have your real name."

"I think so, too," glowed Carraline.

"You feel pretty grown-up, don't you?" the man said, smiling. He stood holding the big box of shoes and rubbers under his arm. "I suppose you'll be having a beau, almost any time now."

"Pooh," said Carraline, pouting, "I'm only thirteen, going on fourteen."

"Is that all?" Alec simulated amazement.

"Yes. Of course you know."

"It's hard to remember," he answered. "You young things grow so fast. It won't be any time till you're married."

Carraline grew pink. "We-e-ll," she said, not denying the soft impeachment.

Alec surveyed her gravely. "You haven't thought about such things yet," he said with gentleness.

"Oh, yes," said the girl, meeting his gravity with her own; "mother has told me."

"She has, eh?" Alec looked confused. "Oh, well, then, of course——" He took a step toward the house.

"And so I know about it," said Carraline. "I know the main thing about it."

Alec's jaw fell. "M-m, well——" he made comment, and could get no farther.

"I know that the main thing is that *the spirit is all, the flesh profiteth nothing*, just as it says in the Bible," the girl went on triumphantly.

McLean stared, his lips still open in surprise. He stood looking at Carraline and beyond her. "That's right," he said at last. "That's true. What your mother has told you is true, Caddie."

"Carraline," the girl corrected him, as she went to put her pail into the shed.

"Yes—Carraline." McLean mechanically accepted the correction. Under his breath he added, "Well, I'll be damned!"

They went into the house through the kitchen. Mrs. Hunt was putting the potatoes into the oven, for the early supper. "Good day, Mother Hunt," said the man.

"Why, how are you, Alec?" she said in a pleased voice. She had not realized that she was calling him by name for the first time. The warm dusk of the kitchen, the heartiness in his voice, her own pleasure in seeing him made her speak with sudden spontaneity.

"Here's the shoes for the old man," he said. "Give 'em to him after I've got out, won't you?" He had a man's horror of being thanked. He laid the box on the table, and stood ready to go.

"He's in the other room," said Elizabeth. The smell of a villainous pipe gave evidence that the old man was not far away. She hated the smell of that pipe, but she would not for worlds have said as much.

"Everybody well?" asked Alec, willing to linger. Caddie had gone into the other room.

"Yes, things are all right," Libbie returned. "I guess it's time to light the lamp."

"Don't bother," Alec interposed. "Is there anything I can do for you? Did Gundersen fix the root-cellar door all right, and nail up those loose boards in the barn?"

"Yes, he did everything fine," said Libbie gratefully; "and one or two other things that he said needed fixing. It was awful good of you——"

"Rats," returned Alec. "He might as well keep busy. He don't work hard enough to hurt him." Gundersen was one of Alec's hired men, the son of his housekeeper. "I'm glad you're getting things ready for winter. They say it's going to be a stiff one." He stood wrapped in his overcoat and muffler, striking one gloved hand into the other.

"I dread it, somehow," said Libbie.

"Well, it's hard on the women," answered Alec. "They're shut up so much. I can see how hard it is for them."

"Yes, it is." Libbie stood rubbing her hand back and forth on the back of a chair. "I wish Averil'd come over oftener," she said.

"She stays in pretty close," assented Alec in a careful tone.

"Too close," said Libbie. "She don't have an easy life."

Alec shifted his feet nervously. "Maybe not," he said.

"Willard's hard to get along with," continued Libbie. It took courage to say that.

"I suppose so," said Alec, still carefully.

"He's pretty mean to the boy, sometimes," said Libbie, studiedly direct. If there was anything she despised, it was a tale-teller; but some things had to be said.

"I'm afraid so," said the man.

"A little while ago, when Bert burned his hand so bad—you remember——"

"Yes, yes."

"His father—Willard—pushed him against the stove—he was jerking him around—beating him, I guess, from what I heard——" Libbie spoke almost in a whisper. She was ashamed, and yet she had premeditated her course.

Alec had started as if he had been struck. "Not that!" he cried, sucking in his breath with a horrified gasp.

"I know I shouldn't tell," said Libbie wretchedly. "But I think you ought to know—you like Bert so well," she finished lamely.

It was getting dark in the kitchen. They could hardly see each other's faces. "Yes, I—like him," said Alec, shuddering.

Libbie clung to the back of the chair. "Alec——" she said, scarcely above her breath.

"What?"

"Can't you—can't somebody do something?"

"I don't see how," answered the man dully. "Don't you suppose I've thought——"

"Yes, of course," said Libbie. "But I'm afraid there's no telling——"

There was a long stillness, broken only by hard anguished breathing, and the muffled sounds of talking in the other room. "I'll go now," said Alec, after a while. "Thank you for—for——"

"I want to do all I can, Alec," said Libbie. More tenderness than she knew vibrated in her voice.

"Yes." She realized that Alec was not thinking of her.

Caddie burst in from the other room. "Oh, has Mr. McLean gone?" she said. "I wanted him to hear how cunning Benjy says what Mr. Gleason's teaching him."

Mother, he says, 'Hey diddle-diddle,' so funny. You want to come and hear him."

"I'll come," said Libbie. "Light the lamps, Carraline, and put some more wood in the stove. I want to show Mr. Gleason his new shoes."

CHAPTER VII

WINTER came on, like the last act of a tragedy. Snow fell, persistently, relentlessly. The lake froze, showing black airholes here and there, jagged lines in the white flatness. Averil, looking at these open places from the front windows, was glad that there was too much snow on the ice for skating. She could not have borne the thought of Bert, circling around those perilous chasms.

Willard was in the house a great deal now. It seemed as if he were hardly ever away. If he drove to town, he went and came with all speed, or insisted on her going with him. Alexander McLean came over every few days, but she never saw him alone. Willard had grown amazingly skillful at keeping them apart. Hubert, of course, was in school every day, and did not get home till dusk.

Faraday spent a good deal of time in sawing and splitting the logs which he had cut the winter before, and which he had hauled in, dry and seasoned, when the first snow permitted using a sleigh. He took care of the stoves, and kept them hot and glowing, day and night. Then he looked after the stock, and puttered about barns and sheds. But there was still a good deal of time for loafing. Often he occupied himself with a newspaper, never with a book.

The paper from Chicago, with its record of sin and

crime, came daily to the house—or at least as often as the rural postman could get through. Willard pored over it, holding it stiffly in front of him, and reading it labouriously, as if eager not to let anything escape. Sometimes he read aloud a bit which particularly appealed to him.

One afternoon, toward sundown, he sat at the window in the front room, reading his paper. Hubert had not yet returned from school. Averil stood at the window, looking across the lake, where recent snow lay white and untouched. She was thinking of Alec, as she always was—wondering what he was doing, whether he were thinking of her, when he would come again. “Listen to this,” said Willard. His voice had something menacing in it. Averil turned, shrinking. “Listen to this,” he repeated. He read in a high impressive voice a sordid story of triangular love. “They ought to be killed,” he subjoined, when he had finished. “They ought to be killed, both of ’em. That man, the husband, he ought to take things right into his own hands. That’s the thing to do in a case like that.” Averil did not answer, but stood gazing, cringing from what he might say next. “Do you know it?” Willard repeated. “A man shouldn’t stand any fooling. The way to do it is to end it.”

“How do I know?” said Averil. “I should think it would depend on circumstances. And anyway, why should he make a murderer of himself, just because somebody else has done wrong?”

“There’s only one way to wipe it out,” repeated Willard. “That is—to wipe both of ’em out, and a third, if there is one.” He rose, tall and threatening, and fixed his eyes on his wife. She felt cold terror gripping her, but she kept her face unchanged. “Oh, well,” she said, “I can’t see that we have any call to muddle up in other

people's business—when they're off somewhere, a thousand miles away."

"There's things going on that ain't a thousand miles away," he retorted.

"Bertie ought to be at home by this time," said Averil, glancing at the clock. "How short the days are! It's dark before you can say scat."

Willard had thrown the paper on the floor, and had thrust his hands into his pockets. The burning look had died out of his eyes. He sat limp and depressed, as he usually did after an emotional crisis. But no one could tell at what moment the paroxysm might return. Bert came running in just then, cold and red-cheeked, and the atmosphere was altered. Averil felt herself relax into comparative ease again.

* * * * *

The next day she had a word or two with Alec. Libbie Hunt had invited her over to drink a cup of coffee in the afternoon. Willard took her over in the sleigh, and then went to the village to buy groceries. He was glad to leave her safely at Libbie Hunt's. Libbie had telephoned to Alec that it seemed almost too coolish in the root-cellar, and if he didn't have anything else to do, he might come over and see if it ought to be banked up a little more. Averil did not know how Elizabeth Hunt manipulated the matter, but all at once she found herself alone with Alec McLean in the sitting-room. They turned to each other, snatching at the rare moment.

"Alec," said Averil hurriedly, "I'm worried—terribly—about Bertie."

"I know," Alec returned. "Is it very bad?"

"Yes. It's getting worse all the time," she whispered.

"He talks about killing people. I'm afraid for Bertie. Isn't there something we can do?"

Alexander stared at her somberly. "I don't think he'd dare to do anything," he said, "but——"

"You don't know how he is," cried Averil, shivering. "You aren't there, day after day."

Alec was scowling and looking at the floor. "I know you have the hardest part of it, in some ways, Averil," he said. "If Willard isn't right in his mind, I suppose something could be done with him——"

"It's just that one thing," Averil replied, "and I don't believe any outsider would think he wasn't right. And besides——" she faltered.

"It would all come out." Alec finished what she shrank from saying.

"Yes. We can't have that, can we?"

"No." Alec brooded, shifting in his chair. He had not come near to her. "If we could only get Bert away—that's the main thing now. You and I, Averil, we have to take what comes to us."

"Yes. Oh, Alec, hurry! What are we going to do about Bertie?" Averil was wringing her hands distractedly. They must make the most of their few minutes together.

"Well, he can't stay with me," said Alec, enumerating possibilities. The one thing which he most wanted was discarded first.

"That would be the worst thing in the world."

"We couldn't make some excuse to have him stay here with Mrs. Hunt?"

"How would it look? And, of course, Willard—oh, no! that wouldn't do." Averil spoke despairingly.

"Can we send him off to school somewhere?" asked

Alec, in desperation. "You can say the country school ain't good enough for him—that it's too far, or that Bert has some sickness, or something."

Averil looked dubious. "We can try it," she said, "but I wouldn't know where to send him."

"I can find out a place, some way," said Alec. "That's the only thing I can think of now."

"It seems hopeless." Averil leaned back in her chair, shutting her eyes. "I'm sure Willard would never hear to such a thing. He'd only go on worse than ever."

McLean sat opening and shutting his hands. He groaned. "If I could only have the little chap with me!"

"I wish you could." Averil sat drooping. McLean was starting from his chair to come to her, when Libbie Hunt entered the room. Her plump face was beaming, and she appeared not to see the sudden change and perfunctory expressions on the faces of her callers.

"We're going to have coffee, Mr. McLean," she said. "You'll stay, won't you?"

"No, thanks. I've got to go on," said Alec. He could not lift the cloud from his brow. He moved absently toward the door. "I'll take a look at the root-cellar, and if it needs more banking, I'll send Gundersen over." He nodded to Averil without speaking. She did not know how she got through the rest of the afternoon, nor how she summoned courage to go back to the house beside the lake with Willard Faraday.

* * * * *

That evening, after Bert had gone to bed, Averil said, trying to make her voice sound natural. "I've been thinking about Bertie, Will."

"Uh?" returned Willard, taking off his shoes beside

the stove. "Thinking about Bert? Well, what about him?"

"It's hard for him to go to school—that long walk in the cold——"

"He gets a ride with the Jensens most every day," Willard answered wonderingly. "And a little cold don't hurt a boy. It does him good."

"It's pretty hard," said Averil. Bert had been eating an apple, and the core lay on a plate. She went to put it into the stove, leaning over to hide her face. "And the school here is sort of poor. Couldn't we send him off somewhere to school, Will?"

The man straightened up in his chair, his mouth open. "Send him off somewhere to school," he repeated. "Good Lord! What'd we do that for?"

"Why, to make it easier for him—to give him better schooling than he's getting here." Averil knew that what she was saying sounded foolish.

Willard made a hissing noise of contempt. "You're crazy," he said; "batty in the top story. Send the kid off to school! Who do you think he is? Who do you think we are—millionaires? I don't want to hear another word o' such rot. Send him away to school," he rehearsed the phrase mincingly and with laughter. "That's the end of such tom-foolery."

"All right," responded Averil. Her heart was beating heavily. There was something so aggressive and bullying about the man that she had no strength to argue or demand. She waited till he had gone upstairs, and then gave way to tears; but they were soon over, because they seemed so useless and unmeaning.

In bed, she lay thinking while the cold snapped in the rafters of the old house. If she could only think of

some way of getting Bertie into a safe place! She went over the suggestions which Alec had made. McLean's house was nearer to the school than the boy's own home, and that fact might be offered as an excuse for a visit with a friend. But of course any hint of such a thing would make Willard more furious than ever. And as far as Libbie Hunt was concerned, she had all that she could do, without taking on anything else; and how could one explain to the neighbours?

Wasn't there something else to be done? Oughtn't she to run away somewhere, and take Bertie with her? Alec would give her the money,—there would be no other way of getting it. But where could she go? And what chance would there be of keeping her course concealed, so that Willard would not follow with anger so uncontrollable that tragedy would ensue?

Perhaps it would be better to stay, and try to keep things calm and settled, pay as little attention as possible to Willard's fits of anger, and let him see that he was working himself up for nothing at all. Perhaps she had been indulging in ridiculous forebodings. Possibly there was no danger to any of them. Probably they were as safe here as anywhere. She could not see anything to do but to stay where she was, and keep Willard pacified, if she could, by the most circumspect behaviour, the most rigid observance of what would please him, and the avoidance of what would make him enraged. She would try to keep Bertie from being alone with his father—with Willard—and protect him as much as she could.

Before she went to sleep, another solution came to her, as it had come before. Should she take still another way? Should she quietly eliminate herself from it all?

There was a black airhole in the lake, out in front of the house. She could go out some evening, when no one knew where she was going, and slip in there, under the ice. It would be a long time before they found her. If she were gone, perhaps Willard would be satisfied, and would let Bertie and Alec alone. Perhaps after a while, Alec would find a way of doing something for Bertie, even of having the boy with him. But even in the midst of these thoughts, she sank back trembling and unnerved. She didn't want to die. She didn't have the courage. It was too horrible even to think of—slipping down into the cold water, under the ice—the darkness—the struggle—no, no! It was out of the question. She fell asleep in the very reaction of her relief at abandoning the fearful idea.

* * * * *

One grey Sunday afternoon, not long after, Willard took the Bible from the table in the parlour. He had been dawdling all the morning, reading old papers, whittling a new knob for the kitchen cupboard, washing and dressing himself, shaving, rummaging in the secretary drawers. Averil had prepared a dinner of chicken and dumplings, and other things which he particularly liked. But in the afternoon he began to glower and scowl and bite his lips. Averil noted the signs with a sinking heart. She had hoped to get through the day without trouble. Hubert was colouring scenes in an agricultural paper, with his water colours. He felt that if the pictures were farm scenes, with plenty of horses and cows and pigs and reapers and steam plows, he could not be accused of doing something which would brand him as a sissy. He had drawn the old cherry table up to the window,

and was absorbed in his work, his shoulders hunched, his tongue showing a pink tip between his teeth.

Averil wondered as she saw Willard take the Bible from its place on the stand in the corner. She saw him running through it, searching, prying here and there for something which, in his ignorance, eluded him. Then he found it. He bent over the book on his knees, reading slowly, with terrible earnestness.

"What is it? What is it?" she kept asking herself.

"Listen." Willard held up his hand in a prophetic manner. "Listen. I'm going to read you something." Averil sat holding her hands together in her lap. Bert scarcely looked up; he was so absorbed in his painting.

Willard began reading out in a loud voice the story of the sacrifice of Isaac. "*And Abraham stretched forth his hand and took the knife to slay his son.*" Willard put out his hand, as if to seize a knife by the hilt. Averil caught her breath. Hubert, paint brush in hand, sat open-mouthed, listening in an amazed way. Watery red paint dripped down from his brush. Willard stopped, looking straight before him. "To slay his son," he repeated; "a sacrifice for sin. That was the only way—a sacrifice—something to wipe it out."

"But Willard," interposed Averil, her fingers clutching one another tightly, "there's more to it. You haven't read it all. There was a sheep or something caught in the bushes. He didn't have to sacrifice the boy." She had raised her voice as if she were talking to a deaf person.

Willard shook his head. "The rest don't matter," he said. "Abraham stretched out his hand and took the knife——"

"Nonsense!" cried Averil sharply. Feminine im-

patience all at once overcame her fears. She began to laugh hysterically. Willard fixed her with a bewildered eye. She went over to him, and took the book out of his hand, still laughing. She pulled it away from him, though he hung on for a moment, like a child. "How silly!" cried Averil, "reading that old story, and only reading half of it, at that. Bertie, go on back to your painting. This doesn't concern you."

"But—but"—Willard stammered—"the sacrifice."

"Sacrifice nothing," retorted Averil. "You go out and sacrifice some of that kindling in the shed. "I want a fire in my room upstairs."

Blinking, Willard went out to the shed. She heard him breaking and splitting the kindling into the small pieces which she liked. Her heart stood still when she recollected that she had, as it were, put the hatchet into his hand, a weapon for the sacrifice. But he came back docilely enough, with his armful of pine splinters. That was the way to deal with him, she thought. But it had been an inspiration. She did not believe that she could handle him in that way again.

CHAPTER VIII

THE winter was a savage one, almost arctic in its severity. It was only by constant slavery to stoves that the old house could be kept warm. The summer kitchen was abandoned, and used only for storing kindling wood, household utensils, meat, and such groceries as would not be injured by the cold. The dining-room now became kitchen and living-room for the family. The large pantry situated between the spare bedroom and the summer kitchen gave ample room for dishes and food and supplies.

A range, new the winter before, served for both cooking and heating, in the living-room. In the front room, or "parlour," a wood stove was kept burning most of the time, and another in Averil's room upstairs. In the rooms which Willard and Bert occupied, a fire was lighted only at bed-time. On especially cold mornings, they ran down in their night clothes, and dressed in the front room, before the fire.

As in most such households in the Middle West, the question of fuel was of prime importance. It was usual to be "forehanded," and prepare the stock of wood a year in advance, so that it might be thoroughly seasoned by the time it was wanted. Large freshly-cut green "chunks," which burned slowly, were used to keep fires going all night. Midwinter was the time when trees were felled and cut into four-foot lengths, so that

they might lie out all the next summer in the ripening heat, and be ready in the autumn for use or sale.

Willard Faraday and Alexander McLean had had for years the custom of helping each other with the wood-cutting. It was cold lonesome work at the best; and the plan of working together at the wood-chopping had become so settled that neither Willard nor Alec could devise an excuse for breaking the custom.

During the week between Christmas and New Year's, Bert was at home, since there was no school in the holiday season. The wood-chopping was going forward, after the interruption of Christmas and Sunday. The weather was so fiercely cold that the men could put in but a short day at the felling; but even so, Averil sent them hot coffee and doughnuts or turnovers, in the middle of the forenoon, and again in the afternoon. Sometimes they built a fire in the snow, at which to warm themselves.

It was a bright, crystalline, frigid day, almost the last one in December. Averil made the afternoon's coffee for the two men, who were out in the far grove, a long way behind the barn, and beyond the tamarack swamp. She could hear the faint sound of their axes, as she poured the coffee into a stone jug, and packed it warmly into a basket, for Hubert to carry.

Bert set out, with the heavy basket on his arm. He was warmly dressed, in his reefer and muffler and mittens, but the cold cut avidly through his clothes. The wind was keen and slashing. He tramped along the against the pale hard sky. He thought of the time, not so very long ago, when he and Uncle Alec were out narrow wood road, looking up at the tops of the trees in the woods, and there was a warm golden colour over

everything. How different it was now! How long the winter was! It had hardly more than begun. The snow would lie on the ground till March or April. Even in the latter days of April, it would not be melted in the dark places under the hemlocks, or on northward knoll-sides in the woods.

The forest seemed almost devoid of animal life. Here and there a jay flashed its bright blue wings across the snow, or chickadees crowded berry-loaded shrubs.

Hubert could hear the sound of one axe, but presently it stopped. He went padding on down the rough path toward the place where the two men were working. He paused, listening, for he heard voices raised as if in dispute. Then he perceived that it was his father's voice that carried the note of anger. It was high, strident, accusing. The voice of Alec was lower, expostulating and pacifying. Hubert could not hear what they said. He did not like the sound of things, but he did not know why. As he came nearer, he heard his own name—*Bert*. Then he heard an oath, a crash, a groan, a horrified exclamation. Alec was saying, "Will! Willard!" in a voice of horror and amazement. Hubert pressed forward through the bushes, instead of going around by the path. He looked out upon the open space where great oaks and maples had been felled and mutilated. He saw the black remains of a fire, the tree with half its branches lopped, at which the men had been working. His father lay in the snow beside the tree. He was huddled in a queer way, and Alec was bending over him, shaking him by the shoulder, and saying, "Will! Will!" in a tone of desperate entreaty. But his father did not move. Then Bert saw that there was blood upon the snow, spattered in hard red drops.

He dropped his basket, and uttered a cry which made Alec raise his head and stare. "Bert, come here," he said, when he had recognized the boy. Bert drew near, holding back, yet fascinated by the sight of the dark inert form upon the snow. "Your father's hurt," said Alec hurriedly. "A limb fell on him. See." There indeed lay a broken branch, its jagged edge showing where it had been severed from the trunk. "He's awfully hurt, lad." Bert, gazing transfixed, without seeing much, was aware that his father lay with his axe beside him, as if it had dropped from his hand when he fell. His fur cap had slipped back, and there was a mark showing on his forehead. His face was not all to be seen, for it was turned sidewise, and partly concealed by his collar.

"Won't he wake up?" gasped Bert stupidly.

Alec shook his head. "I can't rouse him," he said, and his own face was as white as a man's can be. There was a huskiness in his throat. "If he stays here, he'll freeze. You go and tell your mother that something has happened to your father. Tell her—tell her——"

"I'll tell her he's dead," said Hubert, shaking all over.

"Maybe he isn't." Alec leaned over and pulled the collar away, so that the face of the prostrate man could be seen. Hubert, looking at the face in the snow, and the face above it, knew that he had spoken truth. McLean straightened up, commanding himself with a supreme effort. "We'll have to get him up to the house," he said, moving his hands vaguely. The boy was stupefied with fright and horror. "Listen, Bert. You'll have to go up to the house and get your sled, the big one I gave you last year, and tell your mother that your

father's hurt, and have her telephone for somebody—for Mart Hendricks or Gundersen, and for old Doctor Frame. We can't wait to get a doctor out from town." The boy stood trying to control the heaving and shaking of his body. His eyes were blinking, and his lips were moving without sound. "Can you understand?" asked Alec, clutching at his shoulder.

"Yes. I'll go." Bert roused himself and turned toward the forest.

"Get the sled, and have your mother telephone," repeated the man. "I wish I could go and tell her. You wouldn't stay here?"

"No, no!" Hubert backed away.

"Then run."

The boy ran, stumbling and panting through brush and snow. He took the shortest way he could think of, regardless of tangled briars and fallen logs. He fell, scrambled up, and fell again. He was covered with powdery flakes from overhanging branches, and torn by maliciously projecting thorns. He hardly thought at all. One thing only existed in his mind, the awfulness of the white-faced man lying in the snow, in a thin spattering of hard red drops.

He was almost exhausted when he reached the farm yard, and ran up behind the barn and through the shovelled path to the shed door. He pushed open the door, rushed through the cold summer kitchen, and stamped into the room where his mother was sitting. The afternoon sun was waning. She was sitting beside the window, holding something in her hand and looking at it. It might have been a picture in a case; Hubert did not stop to see. He stood in the middle of the room,

breathing in long groaning gasps and crying out, "Mama, pa's hurt—down in the woods. He's killed, I guess. Oh, mama, I guess he's killed."

Averil started up, and the object which she was holding slipped into the pocket of her apron. Her face was wild. "Killed!" She stood staring, incredulous, her arms spread back in a motion of bewilderment and denial. "Oh—*how?*"

"A tree fell on him—a limb or something." The boy sank into a chair. "I ran and ran. Alec said to bring the sled—and telephone for—for Mart Hendricks and Doctor Frame. He said to hurry."

At first Averil could not move. "Killed!" She steadied herself against the table. She closed her eyes, trying to think, to pray. What disaster was this that had come upon the house? Was it a double disaster, more terrible than death? What had Alec——

"Hurry! Ain't you going to telephone?" asked Hubert, getting to his feet.

"Yes, yes!" She ran to the telephone, got the number with difficulty, and called a neighbour, telling him as calmly as she could that Willard had been hurt, out in the wood-lot. Then she called the old doctor in the village. He had virtually retired from practice, hated going out in the cold, refused all country calls if his conscience would let him. Yes, he would come, he told her, but he would have to wrap himself warmly, and get someone to drive him. He had given up his driver for the winter. Yes, yes, of course he would come.

Averil turned away from the telephone. Then she remembered Libbie Hunt. "I'll come right away," said Libbie, over the wire. "I'll get ready and hitch up the horse as fast as I can."

Averil was reaching, distracted, for wraps and overshoes. "Get your sled, Bertie. It's in the wagon-shed. My coat! my scarf!" She wrapped herself as best she could, running back at the last for mittens. The day was bitter cold. Then she and the boy started through the woods with the sled. They found that they must keep to the road, because the sled would not go through the brush. They ran, struggling and lunging, and pulling at the rope. Averil stumbled on the frozen hummocks of grass. Tears froze on her cheeks.

"He's dead," said Bert as they paused once for breath.

"Maybe not," said his mother, with stiff lips. "Maybe the doctor——"

They went on. It seemed hours before they came to the opening in the woods where the trees had been felled. Blue smoke wavered through the clearing. Alec had rebuilt the fire. He had cut boughs from a spruce, and laid Willard upon them, to keep him from the frozen snow. Willard lay stark, unmoving. His cap was over his face.

"Alec!" Averil came groping toward him, her eyes suddenly blinded, whether with faintness or tears she did not know. She swayed. He held her, unsteadily, with low words of courage. Hubert hardly saw them. He was staring at the figure on the ground. "How was it?" whispered Averil. "Oh, Alec, not—not——"

"A branch fell," said Alec, harshly. "Didn't Bert tell you?"

"Yes, yes, but I thought——"

"Averil, we must keep hold of ourselves," said Alec in a peremptory voice. "There's work to do. The first thing is to get him to the house. He'll freeze here. If

there's any life left——” But they all knew that there was not. “Come, can you help?”

“Yes.”

They lifted Willard, a heavy weight, in his mackinaw and shoe packs, and put him on the sled. It was too short, but Alec laid branches across the front, to make it longer. “Bert, you'll have to hold his feet; Averil, his head,” Alec directed. It was a strange caravan: Alec pulling the heavy sled through the snow, over rough humps and hollows; Averil supporting the shoulders and head; Hubert tugging at the feet when the body rolled. Their faces were nearly as white as that one which showed its waxy colour under the fur cap, the mouth open and teeth protruding. It was a fearful journey. Hardly a word was spoken. Averil heard herself breathing in gasps, as if the sound came from someone else. Hubert made little grunting cries as the sled lurched or slid along the way. By the time they reached the more open road behind the barn, Martin Hendricks met them, a dumpy man in long 'coon coat and clumsy arctics.

They got Willard into the house, and stretched him upon the cot couch in the front room. His heavy woodsman's shoe packs showed from the door where Hubert peeped, quaking. They did what they could, with ammonia and aromatic spirits, and hot bricks, and things like that; but it did not need the shaken head and pursed lips of old Doctor Frame to tell them that Willard was gone.

After that, Averil and Hubert went upstairs, to Averil's room, where a fresh fire was snapping in the sheet iron stove. People were doing things downstairs, Hubert did not know what. Averil lay on the bed, with her face hidden, and Hubert sat in the rocking chair, still wear-

ing his reefer, for the room was slow in warming. He was nervous and shaken, and he broke his resolve about crying. He sobbed, with repressed hard sobs that hurt his throat.

He noticed that there was need of more wood. The fire had been hastily built, of slender bits of kindling. With a word to his mother, he went down, after some substantial sticks.

Libbie Hunt was going to and fro in the dining-room and parlor. She had a withdrawn look upon her face, as if she were communing with something higher than the mortals about her. When Bert came back from the shed with his armful of wood, he heard her saying in her steady way, "You'll make out a certificate, won't you, Doctor?"

Old Doctor Frame, a tall grizzled old man, with steel spectacles hanging precariously on his nose, stood in the doorway of the parlor. "Mm, why, yes, I guess so, Mrs. Hunt," he said. "Of course, you know, the body ought not to have been moved, until somebody had seen it. But I understand," he amended hastily, "that Alec wanted to get it to the house as soon as he could, on account of the cold—in case——" He coughed. "So it's all right—under the circumstances."

"We don't need an inquest, do we?" asked Libbie, using the word that the others had shied away from. Alec came from the front room, and stood leaning against the wall.

The doctor looked Mrs. Hunt in the face. "N-no,—no, I don't think so," he replied. "We all know Alec."

"Yes, we all know Alec," said Libbie Hunt.

Alec stood unmoved. His face had not regained its colour, but he held himself superbly under control.

Hubert, looking at him, wondered if that were Uncle Alec, the man with the drawn yellowish face and the bent shoulders and the stiffly folded arms. The boy stood transfixed, with his sticks of wood, not realizing his burden nor his design. He felt that there were things going on about him which he did not comprehend. He was like a person in a foreign country, who hears a language which he cannot understand, and of which he gains an inkling through signs and gestures.

Mrs. Hunt came up to him and put her arm around his shoulders. "You'd best go upstairs, Bertie," she said. "Take the wood up, and see if your mother's all right. I'll come up as soon as I can."

Bert went up the narrow stairs between the walls. Averil, her hair dishevelled, her face discoloured with weeping, half rose from the bed. "Bertie, did you see Alec?" she asked.

"Yes," answered Hubert, putting the wood into the painted wood-box.

"How does he look?"

"All right, I guess," said the boy, opening the stove door. "Kinda queer and whitish, but——"

"Did—did you hear anything about—about what they're going to do?" Averil slid off the bed, and came over to him. She took hold of his arm with a hard grasp. She did not notice that the boy cringed.

He stood blinking and trying to recollect. "I heard Mrs. Hunt ask the doctor if he would make out a 'stificut, or something——"

"A certificate—yes. Did he say that he would?"

Hubert, stirring the coals in the stove, glanced up at his mother, and saw that she looked scared and wild.

"Yes," the boy answered. "He said he would."

"Was there anything said about an in—inquest?" Averil faltered at the word.

"Yes, I guess so. Doctor Frame said, 'We all know Alec.' "

" 'We all know Alec,' " Averil repeated slowly. "You mean—he *would* give the certificate?"

Hubert nodded, squirming away from the grip of her hand on his arm. "Oh, Bertie, did I hurt you?" she murmured contritely. She turned and dropped upon the bed, quivering. The boy regarded her uncertainly. He did not know whether he had better go or stay. He built up the fire, so that it roared and glowed.

Libbie Hunt came upstairs. She lighted a lamp, though the dusk was just descending. She patted Averil's hair, and said low soothing things that Hubert did not hear. "Mart Hendricks is going to drive to Prattsville," she said in a louder tone. "The wind's coming up, and it looks like a storm. If he don't start now, maybe he can't get through." Hubert dimly guessed what Mr. Hendricks was going to town to secure.

Now the neighbours began driving over, through the snow, to visit the house of death. Some of them brought things to eat—cold roast meat, and mince pies, and doughnuts making greasy marks on the sides of the containing paper bags. They asked eager questions—too many questions, Hubert thought, when he heard them at supper time. Libbie answered them in her steadfast way, without a shadow of uncertainty or confusion. Alec went home when he had done all he could. Before he went, he spoke to Bert with words of encouragement and compassion. "You're all right, lad. You've come through it fine," he said. Hubert looked up at him gratefully. "It's a help to have you so—so brave and good."

Alec put out his hand and let it slip along the boy's sleeve. Then he added, "Would you like to come home with me, for a while?"

Bert shook his head. "No, I guess I'll stay with mama," he replied.

"That's best," Alec agreed, and went away. He was to come back later, it seemed. Libbie Hunt and someone else were to sit up all night.

Libbie Hunt carried Averil's supper up to her, and did endless little things for the comfort of the household. It was she who slipped the hot flatiron into Hubert's bed at half-past eight. The night bade fair to be a bitter one. Before he went to sleep, Averil came and kissed him. She was calm now, but he could not see her face in the dim light. He slept at last, but not soundly. In the night he heard the wind roaring in the hemlocks, wailing and swishing the branches along the roof. The cracking of the rafters and the noises of the storm mingled with the muffled sound of voices and footsteps. He was aware of someone driving into the yard, guiding his horses through the dark, and of something heavy being brought into the house.

When he waked in the morning, the window panes were thick with frost, so that the light in the room was grey. The shriek of the wind had not abated. The frozen boughs of the hemlocks still scraped back and forth upon the roof. It was cold in the room, and Hubert could see his breath in a dense cloud upon the air.

Slowly the remembrance came to him that his father was dead. Bewilderment and horror gave place furtively to relief that there would never be anything to fear from Willard again. Struggling to escape such wicked thoughts, Hubert sat up, shivering. He saw the red scar

on his hand, yet unfaded, and the feeling of relief came over him once more.

He could smell coffee, and hear voices, subdued but persistent. His mother came into the room. She was haggard, yet composed. Her black hair was done up smoothly, in its usual coronet fashion. She wore her thick blue jersey over her woollen dress. She went to the bedside of the boy, and patted his cheek. "It's a bad morning, Bertie," she said. "You must dress in my room. There's a fire in there, and some hot water." She looked at him fixedly. "We're alone now, Bertie," she said.

"Yes." He choked. Now, mixed with his relief, came the horror of death. Averil kissed him and held him close, and then went away.

The next two days were full of misery. The storm raged incessantly, with varied but never ceasing moans and shrieks of wind, and with sweeping, drifting gusts and sheets of snow. Roads became impassable. The house beside the lake was shut in by an icy wall from the outside world. Libbie Hunt was there, doing everything, looking after everyone. Alec was there, too, almost himself but visibly suffering. His face was stern and expressionless. There was little that he could do, except to attend to the stock and keep wood boxes filled. He and Averil did not try to speak to each other alone; perhaps they feared for their hold upon themselves.

With Libbie Hunt, Hubert went in once or twice to look at his father. "He looks so quiet and rested," said Libbie, "that I think you ought to see him. It's better to remember him this way."

Willard was quiet indeed, remote, lofty, in his indif-

ference. Hubert, gazing at him, could scarcely conceive this transformation from life and activity to stunned insensibility. It was terrible, but wonderful, too; for Willard seemed dignified and superior, above and beyond them all. Hubert thought of his father as he had seen him with his face twisted with anger, his hands twitching and shaking. Here he lay, peaceful, resigned, rested, free from his hatreds and his passions. The boy was awed and silenced. Libbie Hunt, a little frightened at his immobility, wondered whether she had done wrong in bringing the child into this cold oppressive chamber; but she decided that it was the natural and human thing to do.

The young minister came, his head tied up in a woollen scarf. He made a long prayer, which seemed to Hubert a mere jargon of words.

It was arranged to bury Willard in the little graveyard on the shore of the lake. The reasons were several. The Faradays owned no lot in the little village cemetery at Wellwood. It was remotely situated, and reached only by means of a long lane, now drifted full of snow. The condition of the roads made all travel next to impossible. The task of reaching the cemetery and making necessary preparations in the storm, to say nothing of providing a proper funeral procession, would be a strain on energy and endurance. Besides, Willard's expressed wish that he might be put into the lake-side graveyard was strongly present with Averil and Alexander.

"It would be so much easier," said Mrs. Hunt. "But if you think you can't stand it, Averil, don't do it. We can manage the other, somehow."

"I can stand anything," said Averil in reply.

And so, on the second afternoon of the great storm, they took Willard out on the sleigh as far as the horses could flounder, and thence on the shoulders of men, Alec McLean among them. The little party stumbled and struggled through the snow. Around them were the dark figures of the hemlock trees, and the wide greyish stretch of the frozen and snow-covered lake, with its mounds of laden bushes along the bank. The muffled human forms stood numb and voiceless. The wind, whistling in the treetops, almost drowned the voice of the young preacher as he lifted it in prayer to a Power that had never seemed more distant than on the day of tempest and murderous cold.

When they came back the fires in the stoves were burning brightly. The odd smell had gone from the house, which is now in its usual order. A little luncheon was set out on the table, with hot coffee for everybody, and doughnuts and cheese. People spoke with less subdued tones than before.

Alec's eyes met Averil's in one long look. They had not dared to look at each other until this time, and had spoken only in perfunctory phrases. Hubert saw the look, but it meant nothing to him, except that it made him feel safer and comforted.

He passed the door of the front room, and saw that everything was as it had always been—the cherry table with the books on it, and the sofa and the organ, and the plush rocking chair, which had been pushed out of the way. He felt happier, almost cheerful. The storm was as bad as ever, but its sound was different. He ate plentifully. People began to go away. He went and sat down with some copies of the *Youth's Companion*. Libbie Hunt was washing the dishes, and his mother was

wiping them. Uncle Alec came in to say good-bye. He would come over to-morrow, he said, to see what he could do to help.

Hubert did not know that late that night Alec McLean came back, fighting and panting through the storm. Averil heard him at the side door. She opened it, the lamp-light streaming through the falling snow. Alec leaned against the door-jamb, in a posture of weariness. She took him inside. He held her in his arms, straining and shivering; her face was against the coldness of his cheek. Then he loosed her and went away again. There had been scarcely a word between them.

BOOK II

CHAPTER I

Now came calmer days, days full of quiet and uneventfulness; the feeling of waking after nightmare. The storm passed, the drifts subsided, men dug their way about, or made devious roads through fields less deeply buried than the highway. School began again, the tiniest pupils missing, but the older ones in their places, red as to cheeks, chapped as to hands, and oddly swathed and layered as to garments.

Averil and Hubert were left alone. There was no one who could stay with them. Libbie Hunt had given more time than she could spare to the needs of the Faradays. John-Benjy had fretted for her, even in the company of Caddie and Grampa Gleason. Mrs. Hendricks, a tired, complaining woman with a brood of young children, would have been but wearisome company if she had been able to leave her home and come to Averil's. Mrs. Jensen had children, too, and she was a foreigner; she and Averil had been only perfunctory friends. The neighbours had rallied to the assistance of the widow and the orphan in the time of their great necessity; but now the woman and the boy must look out for themselves.

Averil did not resent the prospect of solitude. She had been much alone, and was not afraid, either by day or night. Yet it was with a sense almost of despair that she saw Hubert setting out for school on the Mon-

day following Willard's death. She kissed the lad, forcing back her tears. "I'm sorry you have to be here alone, all day," he said, faintly discerning her misery.

"I'm all right. I have my work," she said.

But after all the work was of small importance. She had the rest of the winter for doing it. She shut the storm door quickly, after Hubert had gone; the cold darted in at every opening, as if waiting its chance. She went and stood at the window in the front room, and watched Hubert go down the road, where the snow was piled three or four feet deep along the sleigh tracks. The Jensens were to pick him up in the "bob-sleigh," somewhat farther along. It was early yet. The sun was not high, but it made a dazzling glitter on the snow. Blue-white shadows lay in the hollows and behind fences and trees. The woods were cold purple and brown, intermixed with the hard green of spruces and hemlocks. The sky above was a transcendent endless blue. The lake was only a flat white field, with here and there a black rift to show where an air-hole lurked.

Averil did not let her glance stray in the direction of Willard's grave. It was at some distance from the house, and hidden by trees and bushes. The tracks left by the small funeral party had long since been obliterated. She turned away from the window, when Hubert had disappeared, and began such tasks as seemed possible and worthy of attention. Downstairs, only the two rooms and the big pantry were in use. The summer kitchen was used for storage, and the bedroom at the front of the house was closed. For one as deft as Averil, at household work, not much time was required for washing the dishes and tidying the rooms, already clean. The stoves, of course, needed incessant attention.

Averil missed the assiduous care which Willard had given to the heating of the house. She almost thought that she could hear him coming in from the shed, and that if she looked up she might see him standing there with the dry, smoothly split sticks in his arms. She hoped that she would not find herself getting "jumpy" and "seeing things."

She and Hubert had been out to the barn, and had fed the stock and milked the cow; in fact, she had done the milking, a cold repulsive task which she detested. She had shut her teeth, and gone ahead with it, because it had to be done. She had learned how to milk, in times past, in case Willard were ill or absent, but she had seldom been forced to put her ability into practice. She was glad now that the job was over for the day. All she had to do was to take the fowls their hot mash of small potatoes and oats and table-scraps. She wrapped herself warmly and went out to the chicken-house. As she stood beside the barn, looking off into the woods, she remembered, too poignantly for endurance, the day on which she and Alec and Hubert had brought Willard in on the sled from the woodlot down there beyond the tamarack swamp. She hurried into the house, where she could at least be warm and secluded. She looked at the clock, noting that the hour was only ten, and that she still had the greater part of the day before her.

She went upstairs, to do what was needed, and to get some half-finished patch-work from a drawer in her room. Here the silence and the emptiness of the house seemed more oppressive. The door to Willard's room was closed. Libbie Hunt had been in there, but Averil had not wanted to step inside. There were things which

must be packed up or given away; but that sort of ordeal could wait.

Downstairs, at her needlework, within the warm radius of the base-burner, she had too much time to think. Alec, she knew, would accept the convention that he and she must not be much together for a while. Some time—in a few months, a year—they would be together every day. But a year seemed a century, and these coming winter months at least half that time. Well, she would make the best of them, keep a good home for Hubert, do all she could for him, tend the fires, care for the stock, occupy herself with household tasks and needlework and reading. She would put her bedding into good condition, make new bed linen, towels and curtains, try her hand at some braided rugs. She hardly admitted to herself as yet where she expected to use these things.

It was after her early and fragmentary luncheon that the telephone rang, startling her so much in the enclosing silence that she dropped a saucer and broke it. She went to the telephone. Martin Hendricks was speaking. He and Alec McLean were coming over that afternoon to talk with her about settling up the estate. Some mention had been made of this plan, before, but nothing definite had been arranged. "All right," and "Thank you," said Averil. She had shrunk from facing these demands of law and order, but she steeled herself to deal with them as justly as she could.

It was not until the men were at the door, in the early afternoon, that she was sure of what she wanted to do. When overcoats and mittens and mufflers and arctics had been removed, and the council had begun, she was ready with what she desired to say.

"As long as Willard didn't leave any will," Hendricks began, "you know the law gives you only a third. The other two-thirds go to his child."

Averil nodded. "I know that's the law," she said.

"It's a slow, tiresome business, I guess," said Hendricks. "I remember what a time we had when my father died without leaving a will. It was as slow as molasses in January. So I guess you'd better go right at it, Averil, and get it settled up. You'll have to get a lawyer at Prattsville, and as long as that's the county seat, you'll have to go there, anyway."

Averil stole a glance at Alec. He sat leaning back in his chair, with his legs crossed, apparently at ease. Averil could see, in the uncompromising sunlight, how he showed the ravages of what had taken place within the last ten days. His high colour was gone, his eyes had dark lines under them, his temples were perceptibly grey.

"I'm willing to start in right away, if that's proper," she said. "But I don't want to bother with dividing what there is up into thirds and two-thirds. I want to sign the whole thing over to Bertie."

Alec frowned, still not speaking. Hendricks looked disturbed. "Do you think that's right, Averil?" he said anxiously. "Maybe you feel that way now, because you're all worked up, and maybe you'll be sorry and wish you'd done different, a few months from now. We don't want to let you do anything you'll be sorry for."

"I shan't be sorry. I want to do it," answered Averil quickly.

"But——" Hendricks began, in a worried way. "What do you think about it, Alec?"

"Well," said McLean slowly, "I guess it's all right.

Probably she knows what she wants to do. I don't doubt she's thought it over. She'll have to be appointed guardeen until Bert's of age, won't she? And there must be some way of her getting enough to live on, as long as—she needs it."

Hendricks shook his head. "It don't seem good sense to me. This giving good property away to children ain't got anything in it, to my mind. You'll be sorry you've done it, if I'm any judge."

"I want to do it," said Averil. Perhaps she was rash. But she didn't want to keep anything of Willard's except what she positively needed, for the shortest possible time. She didn't care what anybody said or thought.

"All right. All right," said Hendricks. "I just wanted to give you the best advice I could."

There was some talk about the lawyer to be chosen, and a few other details, and then came the plans for conducting the farm, and the arrangements for the winter and spring.

"Wouldn't you like to go into the village to live, for the rest of the winter?" asked Alec. "I guess it could be fixed up. We could take over the stock, among us. It would be easier for you, and easier for Bert to go to school."

"That's a cracking good idea!" exclaimed Hendricks, before Averil could speak. He looked in admiration at Alec.

But Averil shook her head. "There's the potatoes in the cellar," she said, "and other things to look after. I'd better stay here and keep things going."

"The potatoes'll be sold as soon as the weather is warm enough to haul 'em," answered McLean.

"No knowing when," Averil made reply. "And any-

how, I don't want to move." She shrank from uprooting herself from among the things she knew, and going as a boarder into the house of someone else. "It's out of the question."

"Just as you say," returned Alec. He kept his personal preference, whatever it was, out of his voice. "I believe you could get Charlie Jensen to help you once a day with the milking, and taking care of the horses, and I'll send Gundersen over when I can, at night, for a turn or two at things."

"We can get along," said Averil stoutly. "Hubert will have to learn to do what he can, and I'm strong and well. There isn't any reason why we shouldn't be all right."

"Well, you're the one to decide," Hendricks admitted. "I don't see anything to do but make some sort of plan for working the farm."

They discussed the prospects, deciding which fields should be rented outright, which worked on shares, which needed fertilizing, what pastures should be retained, how the hay should be divided;—in short, how the world could go on without the hard endeavours and furious toiling of Willard Faraday.

"I suppose you're well stocked up with stuff for the rest of the winter," said Hendricks solicitously; "wood and hay and grain, and meat, and odds and ends in the cellar." He knew that Willard was forehanded, and that winter provisions were not likely to be lacking.

"Yes. We could live till spring without poking our noses out, if we didn't have to have a little tea and coffee and soda and sugar once in a while," Averil replied.

"You'll get them things all right," Hendricks re-

sponded; "any of us can bring 'em to you from town, when we're goin'; and then when the roads gets better, you can easy drive down yourself, of a Sat'day."

"We'll all see that you're looked after," added Alec. He had not said much, and had been careful to keep the conversation as impersonal as he could.

It had not taken long to arrange Averil's affairs for the year. The men went out to look over the barns, and see what attention should be given to buildings or animals. Presently they were gone, and the afternoon was waning. Averil wrote her letter to the lawyer at the county seat, and then began her preparations for supper.

* * * * *

Averil took pleasure in cooking a hot meal for Bertie, with a special dessert which he liked. This homecoming of his, after the long lonely day, was to be her great event, the one thing which she could surely count on with rejoicing. He came in, puffing and red-faced, as dusk was falling. He stamped snow over the floor, and she ran to sweep it up. She would have liked to kiss him, but refrained, lest he should think she considered him a baby.

After supper, she let her dishes stand unwashed on the pantry shelf, while she read aloud to him a thrilling story from a young people's weekly. She would never have left the dishes in that way when Willard was in the household. She washed them when the story was finished, and Hubert wiped them. Then Averil took down the corn popper from the top shelf in the pantry, and the shelled popcorn, in a tin box, safe from the depredations of mice.

They popped the corn over the hot coals in the front room. Back in the living room, Averil melted butter to pour over the great white flakes.

Suddenly Hubert spoke. "It's nice here without papa, isn't it?" he said.

Averil stood beside the stove, with the little skillet in her hand, holding the melted butter. She was transfixed. Her wide eyes looked strangely upon the boy. She did not reproach him, but she seemed startled and guilty, as if someone had detected her in a wrong deed. "Well, it is," Hubert went on, defending himself against a possible accusation of hardness of heart. "Of course, I'm sorry that he had to—to die; but I'm glad we don't have to be afraid of him any more."

The woman drew in her breath. Her eyes were somber as she proceeded with her task. She could not strictly say that she was not afraid of Willard any more. She poured the butter slowly over the popcorn, and mixed it with a spoon. Bert stood by, his face thoughtful. "Why did he act like that, mama?" he asked, in a lower voice. "Why did he get so mad?"

Pain flitted across the face of his mother. She was about to say, "I don't know." But she could not say it. "He suffered," she answered reluctantly at last. "He was unhappy. He thought things. Oh, let's not talk about it, Bertie!" Her voice was a cry. "Hadn't we better let him stay quiet, and stop thinking about how terrible things were?"

"Maybe," said the boy. He was awed by her emotion, which he supposed to be grief. He took a handful of the popcorn, and munched it. His mother refused to eat any, and sat down close to the lamp, with some of her careful stitchery. Bert got out the paper, and began

reading over some of the exciting parts of the story which they had just read; and he tried to enjoy the popcorn. But he kept thinking of his father and his fits of anger; of the day when he had smashed the dishes, and thrown away the watch. How odd it was to think of the watch, a little silver and glass thing, away down under the ice, in the cold water and the dark! Hubert wished there were some way of getting it out, now that his father was gone, and could not be angry over it. He considered the possibilities of a grappling hook, a rake on a rope, a magnet, even. At last, however, he gave them all up as hardly feasible. He reflected that now or after a while, he could speak to Uncle Alec about it, and ask his opinion as to the process of retrieving the watch. He hardly admitted to himself the hope that Uncle Alec might give him another watch, since there was now no one to object.

He tried not to think of his father. And yet his mother's words kept recurring, "Hadn't we better let him stay quiet?" She had not chosen her words, but to the lad there was something sinister in the phrase, as if by talking about him, they could bring the dead man stalking out of his place in the snow, and prowling around, to plague them.

Hubert was too young to analyze his emotions. His first feeling at the time of Willard's death had been horror; and then relief had followed furtively, not at once acknowledged. His unthinking acceptance of Willard's place in the household, and the man's spasmodic show of affection, had impelled him to render to Willard, in some degree the due of a father. But the occurrences of later months, and particularly the episode of the beating and the burned hand, had almost totally alienated

him from Willard Faraday. Though not fully aware of the danger in which he dwelt, Hubert had felt a repugnance for the man who held the family in the grip of his wrath, who terrorized a woman and a boy by his outbursts of rage. And so, when this man was gone, and an air of serenity, if not of cheer, replaced the atmosphere of gloom and apprehension, Hubert was relieved and nearly happy. It was good to know that he need not come home to a scowling face, or to threats or beating. It was good to know that his mother need not run the risk of cruelty. He did not know how close he had come himself to being a "sacrifice," nor that he was as a brand plucked from the burning.

He wished he didn't have to think of the picture which his mother's words had conjured up, of a restless and vindictive spectre, out among the hemlocks, or peering in at a crack below the curtains. He dug his elbows into the table cloth, and kept his eyes fastened on his paper. When bed-time came, he could hardly bring himself to go upstairs, and he was glad when his mother remarked that she would go up with him, and take his warm flat-iron—he was always clumsy with it—and start the fire in her own room. He heard her in her room for a little while, and was asleep before she went downstairs.

The next morning, as if she had divined his thoughts about the watch, Averil brought out Willard's silver watch, with its silver chain and dangling cat's-eye ornament. She held it up before the boy as he arose from the breakfast table. "Would you like to have this?" she said, her eyes questioning his face.

He stood irresolute, gaping. He took in every detail of the watch, a heavy old-fashioned thing, with the

masculine-looking chain and pendant. For a moment he was lured. But he shook his head. "No, I don't want it," he said. "Thank you just as much. I don't want it."

"Isn't it the kind you want?" asked Averil stumbly.

"It's good enough," he answered, unskilled in words. "It's fine. But—I couldn't take it. I couldn't *enjoy* it."

"I see." Averil saw indeed, but she had hardly thought the boy mature enough to scruple to take the watch, nor emotional enough to shrink from it because it had been Willard's.

Hubert stood frowning and gulping. He was thinking of the time when his father had made him go to bed, when Uncle Alec was there. No, he didn't want the watch.

"Oh, well," said Averil. She went to put the watch into the drawer of the secretary. She was glad that Bertie did not want it. She felt that she could not bear to see him pulling it out and looking at it; but she was willing to do her duty and offer him the watch. Willard had lived austere. There were few personal possessions for anyone to claim. She had offered the boy this relic of her husband's life, and he had refused it, and she would be glad never to speak of it again.

* * * * *

Bert and Carraline, coming home from school, got out of Mr. Jensen's sleigh, at Mrs. Hunt's gate, and ran into the house. They went in at the door of the ell, stamping on the porch, and banging the storm-door with their impetuous entrance. They went through to the kitchen. It was warm and fragrant there. Mrs. Hunt was baking gingersnaps, and John-Benjoy, eating one

of the spicy brown discs, was standing beside Grampa Gleason's chair, between the stove and the window. There were traces of tears on the child's face. The old man was whittling an axle for a miniature cart on the floor, a vehicle which had evidently suffered disaster. Caddie pressed a sounding kiss on the child's hard wet cheek. Mrs. Hunt beamed a greeting at both the young people.

"Have a cookie, Bert." Mrs. Hunt held out a plate, generously piled. Bert took the brown cake with mumbled thanks, and set his teeth into it. He sat down, watching the woman at work, and the old man whittling and consoling the little boy.

"This cart's goin' to be as good as new, and I don' know but what better," Mr. Gleason said, his old face crinkling with pleasure. "And it'll last a long time yet, prob'ly till you're as big as Bert, here. And by that time you'll be doin' a lot of things, yourself, just as Bert does. He shovels the paths for his mother, don't you, Bert?"

"Yes, sir," answered Bert, very polite. "I do now. I never did, much, till just lately."

"Well, John-Benjoy's goin' to shovel paths for his mother before long," the old man continued. "But now Grampa has to shovel 'em. See, Bert, the paths I shovelled." He jerked his thumb toward the long deep ditches of snow in the yard, leading to barns and clothes reel and outhouses. "I tell you, Grampa is some good yet, at jobs like that."

"You are so," said Mrs. Hunt, rising to the occasion. She knew how proud the old man was of being active and useful. "I never saw anyone as strong as Grampa for his age—or for much of anyone's. He's as strong as

a man of twenty-five, and he can dig like a steam shovel."

Bert looked impressed, finishing his cookie, and accepting another from the ready hands of the hostess. The old man laughed triumphantly. In his earlier days, his strength had been prodigious, and he welcomed every intimation that it was not lost.

"You're a regular Sampson, Grampa!" laughed Caddie. He grinned at her affectionately, over the little boy's head.

Hubert liked the friendly talk, the easy harmonious atmosphere. The narrow circumstances of the family, their makeshifts and renunciations, were as nothing to him. The plump and vivacious Libbie, the wistful old man, the red-cheeked inarticulate little boy, the lively good-tempered girl, were all sweet to him for what they meant of kindness and companionship. Unwillingly he made a motion to go. He knew that his mother would be looking for him.

"Can't Caddie come home with me?" he asked, with sudden inspiration. Caddie jumped and glowed, looking anxiously at her mother.

"Yes, I guess so," said Mrs. Hunt. "Want to go home with Bert, Caddie?"

"Sure; I'd love to," Caddie answered quickly. "But I hate to leave you with the work, mother."

"The supper's on the stove," returned Libbie, "and there isn't much else to do. But how'll you get back?"

"I think Mr. McLean is going to send Henry Gunderson over after a while, to do some things for mama," ventured Bert. "If he don't come, she'll have to stay all night, I guess. You don't care, do you?"

"No," said Mrs. Hunt slowly. She liked to have Caraline at home. "I guess I'd better telephone to Alec

and see whether Henry's going or not." She found that he was; and Hubert and Caddie hurried into their wraps and departed in a whirlwind of giggles and good-byes.

They tramped sturdily through the snowy roads, in the early dusk. Caddie's bright eyes twinkled under a crocheted scarf, tied over her shapeless little felt hat. Her feet were in old woollen stockings, pulled on over her shoes, and encased in rubbers. Arctics, which would have been the right thing in that weather, were too expensive.

They found plenty to say, regarding their own affairs, and school, and the other boys and girls. As they came within sight of the Faraday house, Caddie said, slowing her pace, "It must seem queer without your father." She had not been at the house in the time of storm and stress, because she had to stay at home with the old man and the little brother, and because (though she did not know it) Libbie would not for the world have brought her into contact with death and horror. She had been over only once, and then hurriedly, when Alec McLean had driven in with some frozen mutton and some Danish dainty which his housekeeper had made.

"It is kind of queer," the boy returned. After a pause he said, "It ain't so awful bad." He wanted to tell someone how he felt about it.

Caddie seemed to understand. "I s'pose it isn't," she responded. "Your father acted funny sometimes, didn't he? You never knew what he was going to do."

"Yes," Bert confessed. "Mama and I was real afraid of him sometimes." He could feel Caddie's eyes, wondering and sympathetic, in the dusk. "We didn't tell," he said.

"No, there's no use in having folks talking." Caddie

had learned from her mother the undesirability of neighbourhood gossip.

"I thought I'd have to shoot him if he went after mama again," the boy said.

"Oh!" Caddie almost screamed. "You shouldn't talk like that."

"Well, I did think so," said Hubert doggedly. He felt a bit ashamed, and yet he was proud to have impressed the girl. "But mama threw the revolver into the lake, so I couldn't, ever."

"I'm glad she did," sighed Caddie. "It would have been too awful."

"Yes." They trudged on.

"Another thing that's queer," said Caddie, "is thinking of your father out there beside the lake." Bert nodded. Caddie had touched upon something which was to him almost beyond speech. "It's right out there where we went for our picnic last summer. I mean, we went right past it. Would you like to have any more picnics out there?"

"I don't know." Bert was alarmed at the thought. He had merely pictured the snow piled up in drifts, and the sagging pickets of the fence thrusting out their points in a square. It had not seemed as if there would ever be any summer again. "I guess we'll have to find some other place."

"It's real nice right down in the yard, without going any farther," ventured Caddie.

"But it don't seem like a picnic 'less you go off somewheres," objected Bert.

"There's lots of places," Caddie returned. "It's fine over on the Chain. Don't you like it over there?"

"Uh-huh," Bert agreed eagerly. "Me and Uncle Alec

was over there last fall, before it was froze up. It was great. I'd like to go there a lot next summer." There would be no one now, to scowl and rage when he got home.

"That was the time——" began Caddie. She stopped.

"What?"

"When you hurt your hand——"

"Yeah." Bert looked down at his mitten, red in the gloom. "It's all right now."

There was a pause, and then Caddie said in an awed tone, "Do you think your mother's glad he's gone?"

"I don't know." Bert meditated, scuffing in the snow. "She don't act glad, or anything hardly at all."

"Maybe she wouldn't dare say so if she was—were." Caddie corrected herself. She was trying hard to use good grammar.

Hubert considered. "Prob'ly she wouldn't," he said.

"Do you think," asked Caddie in a suddenly grown-up way, "that she made a mistake in marrying him?"

Hubert twisted his head, a process made difficult by the tightness of his woollen muffler, and gazed open-mouthed at his companion. It was almost too dark to see her, yet a white radiance from the snow revealed her face. He felt stunned and abashed. He had never thought of anything like that before. Made a mistake! He had never thought about people's marrying. They just *were* married. How they happened to be so was a mystery which he had not even considered. He accepted a state of matrimony in others just as he accepted the weather or the house he lived in, or anything else which seemed like one of the fixed facts of nature. Mistake! The word struck him dumb. He did not answer, and Caddie waited in vain for his opinion.

They were nearing the house now, which showed as a darker shadow under the hemlocks, with squares of yellow light where the windows stood. They were at the pebbly place in the arc of the shore, where Bert had hunted for polly-wogs, in the summer. He felt that he had aged a great deal since then. Polly-wogging appeared childish sport indeed. "I'll race you to the house," cried the boy, for want of something else to say.

They started running, and dashed through the gate, left open now in this snowy weather, because there were no cattle or tramps to find an unwelcome way within. Bert stubbed his toe on a frozen tuft of grass, and fell headlong, and Caddie forged ahead of him. She flew to the door-step like a bird, laughing and giggling at his discomfiture. He was humiliated, but rather glad that she had won. He wanted her to win, and yet he would not have had the courage to give her the triumph by wilful loitering.

Puffing and blowing they stumbled into the house through the side door. Hardly anyone but the minister used the front door, which opened upon the veranda overlooking the lake.

Averil smiled a welcome as they came bursting in. Now Caddie was the prim girl again, instead of the laughing hoyden. She remembered that she was getting on toward young ladyhood, and she felt, too, the oppression of recent death in the house. She made polite inquiries about the horses and the pigs and the poultry, and about Averil's needlework, which lay upon a chair. She helped to set the table, with quick useful motions. Bert, awkward and useless, stood about, trying to keep out of the way of the two swift-footed women. He washed his hands at the bench behind the door, and made

shift to set the lamp on the table, and pull up the chairs. He joined in the cheerful talk as much as he could, enjoying the warmth and the good food and the unwonted liveliness of the meal. It certainly was nice to have Caddie in the house. When she drove away in the dark with Henry Gundersen, it seemed somehow as if a light had been turned down. The winter darkness and silence around the house seemed more than ever depressing.

* * * * *

On Saturday, Martin Hendricks took Averil into Prattsville to see her lawyer about settling up the estate. Hubert went along, wrapped and muffled like an Eskimo against the cold. He scarcely ever got as far as the county seat, and this trip was a momentous event. The weather had moderated, but was still unpleasantly chilly. The two passengers were stiff and shivering by the time they reached the town. Mr. Hendricks, in his coon-skin coat and fur cap, was more comfortable than they. The town was bleak in the grey light of winter noon. Hubert stared greedily at the red brick court house, standing in the open square, with pairs of black Civil War cannon protruding from the snow. Along the street were two-storied brick buildings, shops and restaurants, the bank, the Elks' Hall, the Danes' Home.

The boy felt a thrill when they drove up to the hotel on the corner of the main street. "We might as well go in here," Mr. Hendricks said. "There's a place to sit and get warm, and dinner won't cost us much more than it would at the restaurant." It was very elegant to walk into the upstairs parlour, furnished with plush chairs and sofa, and heated from iron grills in the floor.

They threw off outer wraps and warmed themselves, and smoothed their hair. The eyes of Hubert devoured the steel engravings on the walls, the long looking-glass, the electric lights with pink glass shades.

Averil felt disheveled and ill-dressed. Her hat was a dark blue one which she had worn for two winters, and it had been pulled out of shape by scarves tied over it in frigid weather. Her clothes came usually from mail-order houses, and she wore them a long time. She had not provided herself with any mourning garments, and did not mean to do so, making her isolation her excuse.

She went at once to the office of the lawyer, for a preliminary interview. Hubert walked up and down in front of the hotel, feeling important, as if many people were looking at him. He was interested in everything that he saw. After a while his mother came back, and Mr. Hendricks appeared from the harness shop across the street. Dinner was a magnificent and somewhat terrible experience: trying to understand what the waitress said, and telling her what one wanted. Bert found that Mulligatawny soup, for all its long name, was not so different from what he had at home; but he also discovered that apple pie with ice cream on it, in winter, was something strangely delectable.

All the afternoon he prowled in stores, the public library, the court house. He had the feeling of the dweller in the country who catches wistful glimpses of grandeur and diversion in the town, from which he is unaccountably cut off. His mother had given him two dollars. He spent them with alternations of recklessness and caution, and went home loaded with bundles, like a belated Santa Claus.

Averil's experience opened her eyes to the ramifications and peculiarities of the laws governing inheritance. She found that she could only begin the processes needed for the transfer of Willard's earthly possessions to the hands of Hubert. She had set her hand to the task, and would not give it up. More and more she was settled in her decision to take nothing from Willard except a temporary living and a small wage for the care of the farm and its belongings.

Hubert rode home dreamily, under the warm robes, thinking of what he had seen and bought; but he was after all richly contented to clamber out of the sleigh, and stumble into the shelter of home, with the dark coming on, the mystery of a house left for hours untenanted. He had not the momentary shrinking of Averil, who found herself wondering confusedly as to what unbodied presence had hovered in the rooms while she was gone. She was thankful for the practical voice of Martin Hendricks, saying, "I'll go in and see if your fires are all right, before I jog on." She was glad that it was Hendricks and not herself who opened the door and stepped first into the darkening living room.

CHAPTER II

AVERIL was a good deal alone. In the morning, on week days, she arose early enough to get breakfast in good time, and send Hubert off, well-looking after, with his tin dinner pail. Then she washed the dishes and made the two beds, and swept and dusted. These simple tasks did not take her long. Sometimes she dallied at the work, or made some elaborate dainty for Hubert, when he should arrive from school. She finished the patchwork which she had long ago laid aside, and used it for the top of a tufted quilt. She made fresh comfortables for the beds, sending to a mail-order house for challis of soft pleasing patterns. She sewed rags for carpets and braided rugs. And furtively she began making new towels, with embroidered ends or crocheted insertions; and pretty serviettes, and hemstitched pillowcases and lace trimmed camisoles. It was like the work of a prospective bride. She took pleasure in her careful stitches and the neat perfection of her handiwork. She sat beside the stove in the front room, where the winter sun shone on the lake and the low sloping front yard, with its tracery of leafless shrubs and trees. There was nothing to see but snow and sky. From the side window she could catch a glimpse of the road beyond the lane, but it was not often that anybody passed. So seldom did a sleigh go by that it was hardly worth while waiting

to see one. She could not even see the smoke from another chimney, though the Hunt house was not more than three-quarters of a mile away.

Although there was in Averil's heart the bridal hope, she was much of the time unhappy. She did not deceive herself into thinking that she felt real grief for Willard. Such deception was impossible. But she was not so heartless as to fail in understanding the tragedy of the man's life, a tragedy more poignant than his death. She thought with aching futility of the suffering which had been his, the twinge of resentment, the stab of suspicion, the murderous pang of jealousy; then the uncertainty and shame, and self-abasement. She wished now that she had told him the truth, so that his anguish might have been that of certainty, not of mystery and fear. It would have been fairer to him, she thought. But then the quick perception came, it would have been fatal, too. Somebody might have paid for her frankness with a life. Perhaps it would have been the boy. She shivered, picturing the catastrophe, with its accompaniments of scandal, imprisonment, separation, emptiness. No, it was better as it was, even though Willard suffered for the guilty, even though——

Here her thoughts always halted, horrified. What, in actuality, had been the manner of Willard's death? She had never dared to ask Alec what had happened on that day in the forest. He had never told. Everyone else had accepted with apparent docility his story of the falling branch. "Everybody knew Alec," and attached to him no suspicion, or dared to whisper none. But she knew Alec, too. She knew his love for Hubert, his thwarted impulse of fatherhood, his fear, even while he belittled hers, that Willard might do fearful violence

to the lad. She tried to visualize the scene in the woods, the cold, the snow, the two men with their axes, the falling trees, Willard spewing out the bitter word, held so many years in his throat; prating of sacrifice, threatening perhaps; a combat, triumph of the stronger, death.

Sometimes a more hideous scene rose before her; isolation, temptation, attack upon an unsuspecting companion, a swift sudden blow, the foulness of murder on the pure winter air. But this picture she must perforce put from her with a convulsive motion of her hands. She would rise from her chair, walk through the rooms, stare out of the windows, go to the barn to look after the stock, feed the stoves anew with fuel, search out harsh household tasks—do anything to keep the vision from her mind. When it came in the night, it was worse. She must get up from her bed in the cold, turn up the lamp, which she kept burning for company, prowl about the desolate house, sew, read, find some distraction from the dread of what she might some day discover.

It was at these times that she was most sentient to the proximity of Willard's grave. It was then that Willard seemed menacingly near. She hated herself for her childishness, but she could not for her life refrain from pulling the shades down closer to the window ledges, to shut out a peering face with a mark upon the forehead.

Hubert slept peacefully now, unconscious of his mother's unrest. Averil felt that she ought not to be so alone. She knew that this state of isolation need not last long; but while it lasted, her solitude was to have phases of the unbearable. And later, when it should have ceased, there would still be times like these, when fear of the hidden truth would rack her. She would never dare to ask Alec for the details of Willard's death,

and like Willard himself, she would always suffer the agonies of uncertainty and suspicion.

It was after these wakeful nights that she most welcomed the wholesome intrusions of Libbie Hunt and Carraline, that she rejoiced in the teasing and chuckling of the two young people at their lessons or their fun; that she reassured herself with the brooding calm of Alec as he sat smoking beside the stove.

Caddie came as often as she could to the house, encouraged by her mother, who had Averil much in mind. The boy and the girl got on well together. Caddie was a year older, and correspondingly more mature. Her age gave an excuse for a little unaggressive mothering of Hubert, a small officiousness accepted without questioning by the boy. Averil watched them with faint smiles of amusement, and sometimes a sober passing wonder as to what their attitude toward each other would be later on, when both of them grew self-conscious and self-willed.

In the evening the two would sit for half an hour or so at the dining-room table, covered with its checked cloth, and study the lessons for the next day. Sometimes Carraline would stop to help Hubert over a hard point in his algebra or grammar. She did her own tasks quickly and quietly, with no complaints or muddling. She went at them directly, and finished them with despatch. "You don't seem to have such hard lessons as I do," said Hubert innocently, one evening.

Caddie laughed. "I guess she picks you out for all the hard stuff," she said teasingly.

"Huh," grunted Hubert, flushing, "I s'pose I am a bonehead." As a matter of fact, he was far from that, but he was less interested in grammar than he might

have been, and algebra was a meaningless juggling of symbols.

In June, Caddie was to finish the country school, and then the problem would be, What next? Should she try to go to the high school, at the county seat, or should she give up going to school, and relinquish her hope for a real education? "I don't see how mother can get on alone," she said to Averil when they were talking the matter over. "She has so much to do, and so little to live on, and I can help her a good deal if I'm not in school."

"It would be hard for her without you," admitted Averil.

"If I went to Prattsville to school," the girl continued, "of course I'd have to work for my board somewhere. We haven't money enough to pay for my board, you know. It would be bad enough to have me away from home, without paying to keep me away," she said ruefully.

Averil considered the question. It seemed impossible for Caddie to go away to school. She did not appear to have much before her except drudgery and isolation, as so many country girls and women have even in these later days. She would marry, probably, merely exchanging one hard situation for another.

During these winter evenings, the young people were gay enough, after their lessons were done. They ate apples and made taffy and cracked nuts; and worked out puzzles, and played checkers, and put together cut-up maps and pictures, and read, and pasted cuttings into scrap books. They never seemed to lack for diversion. The chill seclusion of a country home on a winter night had no perceptible influence on their spirits. As for

Averil herself, she would have paced the floor in desolation, if it had not been for the cheerful presence of the children studying or giggling or arguing beside the lamp.

* * * * *

Alec McLean sent Henry Gundersen over frequently, to help with the heavier tasks at the Faraday place; but he did not come oftener than once or twice a week, himself, and then chiefly in the evening, when Hubert was at home. There was a tacit acceptance of a formal relation between him and Averil. Late in January he announced that he was going away for a while, making a journey back to New York State, perhaps venturing so far as New York City.

"I need the change," he said to Averil. "I wish you could get away, too."

"Of course I can't," she answered. "Bertie has to go to school. And I guess it's better for me to stay right here." She knew that Alec was getting away as soon as he dared after the tragedy. An earlier escape might have been adversely remarked. She was glad that he could go; for though he never lost his self-control, nor spoke of his own feelings, she felt that he was suffering. She kept to herself any comment which she might have made on his departure.

"It's good that Alec can go, isn't it?" said Libbie Hunt, comfortably darning stockings in Averil's front room.

"Yes. He hasn't been away in a good while," said Averil.

"A change is good for everybody," commented Libbie. "And Alec needs it, if anybody ever did," she added.

Averil did not ask what she meant. There were times when she believed that Libbie knew everything—that

she had an uncanny way of seeing into the dimmer areas of all that took place, of discovering motives which their originators thought perfectly concealed. To-day, glancing at the placid face over the ragged stocking, she wondered, not without shrinking, as to how much Libbie really understood of the situation; and she conceded that it would be hard to hide much from the simple, wise penetration of Libbie.

February dragged. Alec McLean was gone, and the two in the house by the lake missed the prospect of his carefully regulated calls. There was a note from him; a picture postal card or two for Hubert. There could not be many messages lest the rural mail carrier should discern their number, and carry news. Averil marvelled at the freedom which she felt in Alec's absence. She wished now that he had gone away oftener during the years which had passed. There would have been seasons of relief. She wished too that she could have gone. She and Willard had not taken many trips. Once or twice they had gone to the State Fair, once to the Governor's inauguration at the Capital, two or three times to Minneapolis. Willard had gone away once and left her, when he had been called back to New York State by family affairs. That was thirteen or fourteen years ago—not long after they had settled on the farm. Averil had acquired the habit of shutting out of her mind the remembrance of that period.

At times, while Alec was gone, she diverted herself by imagining him on trains, at the houses of his relatives, walking in city streets. There were jealous moments when she saw him meeting other women, comparing them with her, deciding perhaps that he could find someone more to his liking. She even entertained the

horrid thought, "What if Alec should desert me now? What if he should be tired of it all, and give me up for someone else?" This possibility was so appalling that she could not face it for more than a moment at a time.

During the warmer days, the potatoes were sorted in the cellar, and sold. Gundersen took them into town. Martin Hendricks helped with the disposing of the grain and the hogs. These matters occupied some of Averil's time. She sewed more busily than ever, and ordered more books and papers, even sent to her mail-order house for a little phonograph with a limited repertoire, of which Caddie and Bert never tired. Sometimes she drove over to Libbie Hunt's, or down to the village, or went to bring Bert and Caddie home from school.

Alec was back by the first of March. He looked about the same, Averil thought. She had expected some radical change in his appearance, indicating an escape from himself. He brought only a few small gifts for Bert, to the great disappointment of the boy, who had secretly expected a watch. He did not know with what renunciation Alec had foregone the pleasure of a riot of gifts for those in the house at the lakeside. Caution was necessary and wise, even if it were painful.

There was a gift for Averil, of which nobody knew. After she was sure that Bert was asleep, not before, she would slip the ring on her finger and look at it while she sewed. It was the quieting of a great fear. Alec had not met anyone whom he liked better. He had thought of her during his journeyings, and had brought her this pledge of his constancy.

* * * * *

The formalities of setting the estate had been accom-

plished, after the usual delays. One day Averil said to Hubert, "There! The last paper is signed. This place doesn't any of it belong to me any more. It all belongs to you."

Bert looked up from his reading. His grey eyes were puzzled, and his forehead was ridged. "It don't belong to me, to do exactly what I want to, does it?" he asked.

"No, maybe not," his mother answered. "Not till you get to be of age. Then you can do what you want to with it."

"That's when I'm twenty-one," he meditated. "It's an awful long time yet."

"Yes," Averil replied. "It is. And I'm guardeen till that time comes."

"Oh, well, I don't see as it's any different," said the boy carelessly, and went back to his paper.

He was not much impressed. For a minute he had felt big and rich. But it was hard to keep on feeling like that when things weren't any different, and weren't going to be for years and years. He forgot all about the matter, except at the rare times when it was mentioned, or when some chance remark suggested it to his thought.

He spoke of it to Caddie, of course. "Don't you feel—all puffed up?" she asked, her eyes full of respect.

"No, course I don't," he asserted. "Mama as good as has it for ages yet. She'll be living here for an awful long time, and I don't see why I should act as if anything belonged to me."

Hubert had grown taller and stronger in these last months. He threw himself more whole-heartedly into the life of school and home. He seemed to study more easily and to learn more quickly. His nervousness was almost

gone. Release from fear had given him a newness of life.

Warmer weather came on. The snow melted and ran off upon the lake. By night and day a rending and shivering told of the cracking of ice. Long black fissures appeared, widened, multiplied. The ice broke up, and became a rough grey moving mass. The air was sweeter, with the tang of winter gone. Hens cackled about the barn and yard. Averil, running out bareheaded for the eggs, felt the escape from prison which country folk so often know in spring. The gloom was lightened. Processes of being had begun over again, with more vitality, and with some promise of joy.

* * * * *

Caddie regretted, in secret, every day of school that passed. The teacher was an amiable half-ignorant girl from a normal school in the county, but though she lacked amenities she kept good order, and let the older pupils work as hard as they liked. Caddie loved making a good recitation, loved writing out her neat exercises, looking up words in the dictionary, tracing trade routes on maps, reading the books of biography and travel which the school library afforded. It seemed as if she could not bear to give up the chance of learning, of knowing things, of being somebody as she mentally phrased it. But she did not say much. There was no use, and she did not want to vex her mother with futile complaining. So "next year" was scarcely ever mentioned. The demands of the moment occupied her speech.

One day in the spring, Alec said to Averil, "I've been thinking about Caddie—or Carraline as she likes to have us call her."

"Yes?" said Averil absently. "She's a nice girl."

"What's she going to do next year, do you know?" asked Alec.

"Why, stay at home, I guess," was the reply. "Mrs. Hunt says she can't send her away. She hasn't the money, and could hardly spare her, anyhow."

"How would it do," said Alec slowly, not without hesitation, "for me to send her to the high school in Prattsville? I could spare the money. The cows are bringing me in more than I ever expected. Caddie takes to education, better than most folks. What do you think?"

"Of course I think it would be fine," said Averil; "but, Alec, you know how people are. Wouldn't there be a lot of talk?"

"Oh, I don't believe so," Alec replied. "Everybody knows what kind of a woman Libbie is. And if that sneak of a Benje Hunt won't do anything for his family, I don't see why nobody else should."

"She thinks he's perfect," said Averil.

"I'm not so sure," Alec returned. "Anyhow, Caddie hadn't ought to have to suffer."

"Where do you suppose he is all this time, Alec?" said Averil, her mind on the absent Benjamin.

"The Lord knows," McLean answered. "He told me he thought he'd go South for the winter." His face relaxed into a satirical smile.

"How on earth—oh, well, it's none of our business," Averil sighed. She was sorry for Elizabeth Hunt, but in her opinion the poor woman was better off without her husband than with him. "Why don't you say something to Libbie about sending Caddie to school?"

When Alec, a week or so later, made his halting suggestion, Libbie Hunt looked happy and confused. "I

hardly know what to say," she stammered. "It's lovely of you—perfectly splendid. I shan't say anything to Carraline yet. We'll talk about it again, before fall. I don't know as I can get along without her."

"That's the question," Alec agreed. "Well, think it over. There's lots of time yet." There was, to be sure, plenty of time for a good many things to happen before September. This was only April, and the long summer was yet to come.

* * * * *

Early one evening in April, Bert, coming home from the Hunts', where he had been for supper, met a stranger on the road, a smallish, bearded man in a ready-made suit and a soft felt hat. He was carrying a shabby suitcase, and trudging along somewhat disdainfully, gazing about at earth and sky. He gave Bert an abstracted glance from under the brim of his hat, but said nothing. Not till after he had passed did Hubert understand that he had seen the man before. When he arrived at home, he ran to speak to his mother. "What do you think, mama? Mr. Hunt has come back."

"My stars!" Averil was amazed and distressed. "How do you know, Bertie?"

"I saw him going along the road, towards Mrs. Hunt's," the boy asserted.

"Dear me, dear me," said Averil, under her breath. "Poor Libbie Hunt!"

At about that time, or a little later, Libbie Hunt was out in the grassy side-yard, taking in the clothes from the line. Beyond her stood a row of plum trees, their thin boughs flecked with bloom. A grape vine along the fence exhaled its wild fresh odour. Budding lilacs,

slenderly leafed, were massed about the house. The sky had the cool greenish tinge of spring, and a new moon hung over the horizon. Libbie Hunt, not a poetic woman, felt the exquisiteness of the evening, and the touching quality of her little house, set in this lovely scene. It seemed only a house of happiness, in spite of deprivation and toil. She could hear the murmur of voices; Carraline and Grampa Gleason were in the kitchen, where the girl was finishing the domestic work of the day. John-Benjoy was in bed and asleep. With a sigh of restfulness, though she was tired, Elizabeth Hunt pulled a pair of pillow-cases from the line, rejoicing in the clean smell which they seemed to have caught from the outdoors.

Indifferently she perceived a dark form, carrying a bag and moving slowly upon the road in front of the house. "Maybe Alec's getting another hired man," she thought. "He needs one. Or maybe it's a tramp." The man stopped, turned in at the wagon gate with its sagging posts. Libbie stood holding the pillow-slips in her hands. A shock and quiver ran over her frame. For a second she felt weak and faint. "Ben!" She spoke the name soundlessly. "He's come back!"

The man came up the wagon track, putting on jauntiness as he walked. "Well, hello, Libbie," he called. "Here we are again." His voice was mellow, not of the countryside. "I suppose you don't know what a rare evening it is, old girl. You don't care for anything but the washing."

Libbie sought for some sort of words to welcome him. "Why, Ben, I—I—you've been gone a long time——"

"Not so very long," the man returned, with an artificial heartiness. "Glad to see me, eh? Going to kiss me?" He brushed her cheek with his beard. "Well!

Things look fine. It's not such a bad country as I thought. I'm hungry, though. Got anything to eat?"

Libbie had been standing as if stupefied. "Yes, I guess so," she answered, trying to compose herself. There was always something to eat. She twisted her hands together. "I—I'm so surprised," she was saying in a voice which shook in spite of her attempt at its control.

"Come on into the house." Benjamin pulled at her sleeve, and then took up his suitcase. They went in, leaving the half-filled basket of clothes behind on the grass. Libbie was unnerved and trembling. Carraline came to the kitchen door, and peered at them through the dusk. "That you, Carrie?" said Benjamin. "Do you know who this is?"

"Father!" There was astonishment, but no joy in the voice of the girl. "Oh! So you've come home."

"Yes, I've come home." The man was doggedly jovial. He was evidently enjoying the surprise, even the consternation, which his advent had caused. "Give us a kiss." Carraline turned to him a dutiful cheek. "That's the girl." He stepped over the threshold of the kitchen. "Why so dark here? Let's have a little light." He set down his bag. The old man's form showed against the window. A match flared. It was the efficient hand of Carraline which had lighted the oil lamp on the table. The yellow glow struck up toward the unsteady hands and the bewildered face of the old man. Benjamin gave him a gaping stare. "Ho! Mr. Gleason, is it?" he exclaimed. "Making us a call?" He did not offer to shake hands. Mr. Gleason stood in recovered dignity, saying nothing.

Libbie hurried to say, "Grampa is staying with us now. You didn't know——"

"Staying——" Benjamin continued to stare. "I don't understand."

"He's staying here—living here," announced Libbie firmly.

"Oh. Now I get it. He's living here," said Benjamin. There was a studied insolence in his manner. "A surprise, I assure you. I had no idea of this honour—none at all."

The old man shuffled uneasily, and his jaw quivered with his agitation, but he stood his ground, without speaking. "We like to have him here," said Carraline, putting her hand on the old man's arm.

"In that case," said Benjamin with exaggerated politeness, "we shall, of course, say nothing more—at present." He bowed to Grandpa Gleason with a humourously insulting air. "Well, ladies, where's that supper I was going to have? I don't mind confessing that I'm ravenous."

"We'll get you something, right away," said Libbie. With her hands busy, she could control herself.

"A good many times, while I've been gone, I've thought of your cooking, lovely Libbie," said the returned traveller. He went to wash his hands at the bench in the corner. Carraline began setting out dishes on the leaf of the kitchen table, while Libbie poked at the fading fire, and coaxed it with chips and kindling. The old man slipped away to his bedroom, with a mumbled good-night.

Benjamin settled himself to wait, while the two women scuttled about, preparing his repast. "Was that Will Faraday's boy I saw just now, on the road?" he asked. "Or perhaps should say"—he savoured the allusion—"was that Bertie Faraday?"

Elizabeth turned to him a face sedulously kept unmoved. "Yes, it was Bert, I guess," she answered. "He left here a little while ago. Willard's dead, you know," she said after a pause.

"You don't say!" Benjamin stared. "Dead! Well, well." He seemed to consider. "One never knows his luck," he remarked. "So Will's gone! Anything happened since?" His voice was cynical. Libbie made no reply. She was pouring beaten eggs into a hot frying-pan. "Averil living there, just the same?" asked Benjamin again. "Nothing happened?"

"No, nothing's happened," replied Elizabeth, with unintended asperity.

"Give 'em time," said Benjamin with a laugh. Libbie clattered the lid of the tea-kettle, so that Caddie might not hear what her father was saying. "How's the farm been coming, this last year?" the man went on. "Things looked pretty good as I passed the fields."

"Yes, things are all right—fences kept up, and all that," said Libbie. "Of course, it's too early to have the crops in yet."

"Hendricks and Furlong working things on shares?" asked Benjamin.

"Yes," answered Libbie. She lifted the edge of her omelet, and peered under at its delicate brownness. Benjamin asked more questions, and she made her brief replies with dutiful celerity.

Then, as if he had just thought of the rest of the family, Benjamin asked, "Oh, how's the boy?"

"He's fine!" Libbie's eyes glowed. "He's a sweet little fellow, Ben."

"Yes, I suppose so," said the father. "I'll see him in the morning. Must have grown a lot."

"He has. He's a real little man," Libbie said tenderly. "He ain't in school yet, of course, but he's learned some of his letters from his blocks."

"You're going to school, are you, Carrie?" asked Benjamin.

"Yes, sir," Carraline made answer, from the other side of the room, where she was cutting bread.

"She finishes this June," said Libbie, busy with the last stages of the omelet.

"Oh! She finishes her education," cried Benjamin jocosely, a smile spreading on his small bearded face. "Doesn't need to know any more, I suppose?"

Carraline winced, and her fingers trembled as she put the bread on a plate. "It mightn't do me any good if I did," she said. Her mother had not yet told her of Alec's plan.

"It's just as well not to know too much," remarked Benjamin. "I mean, for women. Sometimes one wishes that they had a bit of education, but after all—— Now, that looks like a nonpareil of an omelet. If a woman can cook and use decent grammar, I don't know that anything else is worth bothering over."

"It's ready now," said Libbie, without comment. Carraline set a chair for the guest. He ate hungrily. The conversation was slight and perfunctory.

When he rose from the table, he sighed as if with pleasant weariness. "I'm tired," he said. "I need plenty of hot water, to clean up with. Let me have a *lot*. Any clean shirts here? All I have with me need washing."

"Yes, I think there's one left, from the last time you was here," said his wife, her tongue betraying her nervousness.

"*Were*, my good woman—*were*," the man corrected

her. "It didn't fit the old man, eh?" he inquired satirically.

"No, you're smaller than he is," said Libbie, filling a kettle with water from the big pail. Benjamin laughed. Carraline went out to the pump for another pail of water. Her face was flushed, and her lips were unsteady.

When the water had been put on to heat, and the fire had been replenished, and the dishes cleared away, Carraline said primly, "I think I'll go to bed." She kissed her mother, said "Good night, father," with ceremonious politeness. She left Elizabeth Hunt alone with her husband.

* * * * *

The next morning, before Benjamin was up—he was a late sleeper—the old man said to his hostess, "Well, Libbie, I guess I'd better go."

"Go where, Grampa?" asked Libbie anxiously. She was heavy-eyed, and her face was less pink than usual.

"I don't rightly know," said the old man. He spilled his coffee as he poured it into his saucer. "Somewhere, anyhow. Back to Almiry's maybe, or——"

"Oh, you can't do that!" cried Libbie in alarm. "There isn't any reason why you should go, Grampa. You know we love to have you here."

The old man tried to drink his coffee, but put it down again. "You and Caddie do," he said. "But there's one that don't."

"Well." Libbie could not protest. "I know, but——"

"It makes it hard for you," said Mr. Gleason.

"No, I can manage," said Libbie. She did not know how harassed her voice was. "Besides——" She hesitated. "It might not be for very long. You never know

what he's going to do. He thinks it's a hard life here."

"He might stay quite a while," the old man returned. "It's getting warm weather now, and things'll be easy. He might stay till fall. I don't want to make trouble. I ain't one to go shovin' in between husband and wife."

"You're not coming between husband and wife," cried Libbie fiercely.

"Maybe Averil Faraday would take me, for a while," ventured the old man with the humility of the homeless. "She and Bert's alone now."

"I don't want you to go," said Libbie decisively. "You wait, Grampa, and see how things come out. Here, your coffee's cold. I'll get you another cup." The old man ate and drank in relieved silence. He had felt a shaking terror of having to find a new home.

* * * * *

Benjamin stayed on, during the lovely freshness of May and June, and the overpowering heat of July. The household revolved around him. He rose later than the others, and had a special breakfast. Mrs. Hunt came in from her weeding when he appeared at the back door to signify the need of her service. If she were canning fruit or making jelly, she must stop in the midst of exacting processes, or call Caddie from her work. There was more washing and ironing than usual, to do, for Benjamin liked clean shirts and collars, and demanded freshness in table cloths and serviettes and towels.

He pottered about, during parts of the day, saving his face by a modicum of labour in the garden; but he frequently had a headache, after such exertion, and must then lie on the sofa in the cool dining-room, with his

hat shading his eyes. If anyone would listen, he would tell tales of his adventures—what he had seen in Chicago and other cities. It seemed that he had spent the winter in Memphis; but he had come North at the first approach of spring—because he wanted to have a little amusement in Chicago, he said. He had seen plays and heard singing, and had witnessed the triumphal progress of great men, from railroad station to hotel. “I saw Taft one day,” he would begin; or, “Roosevelt isn’t such a big man as some people think he is—physically, I mean. Now, I saw him——” He was listened to chiefly in silence. Alec McLean regarded him with open dislike, and made Benjamin feel his opinion. “Alec McLean needn’t have such a lofty air,” Benjamin complained to Libbie. “He has his own little oddities to answer for.” Libbie made no reply, for she could not think of anything to say.

Alec and Averil expressed some wonder as to how the traveller had subsisted during the many months which had elapsed since he had left home. They did not, however, feel like questioning him, partly, no doubt, because they did not desire to add to his self-importance by exhibiting too much interest in his history and methods. It was Bert who innocently asked the question, seeing nothing odd in wishing to know what was a man’s means of earning a living. “What do you do to earn money, when you’re away, Mr. Hunt?” he asked one evening, when he and Caddie and Benjamin were sitting out on the side porch.

Benjamin hesitated, and then said, clearing his throat, “Well, I have plenty of ways of getting along. I can do a little bookkeeping, anywhere. I learned that a long time ago. And then there are other occupations of that

sort. I can go into almost any town, and get a job at handling some books or looking them over, before the day is gone."

"That's fine," said Bert in real admiration. To be able to walk into a place and get a job denoted a man of power. There were suggestions of excellent reward about such jobs as that, too. And there was a suggestion of being a gentleman, wearing a white shirt, and working in an office with well-dressed men and women. He reported his findings with satisfaction. Averil and Alec looked relieved, for their curiosity was placated; yet they were skeptical, too, wishing perhaps that Benjamin might suffer a bit more than he seemed to do, while he was away from his home and family.

Libbie made as little comment as possible on her husband's behaviour. She had grown silent and thin-faced. She drooped in the hot weather. Sometimes she did not come down to breakfast. Caddie was appalled, as at the failure of the sun to rise. When Elizabeth came down, white and languid, Caddie would run to get her coffee, tempt her anxiously with food, beg her not to go out in the sun. But Libbie would be suddenly better, and go on with her work. There was an ominous tension and unrest within the house. For one thing, Benjamin contrived in numerous petty ways to vex and offend the old man, and to make him feel that his departure would be welcome. So frequent were these onslaughts, and so pitiful their result upon the victim, that even Averil, who came over but seldom, was aware of them. "Hadn't I better take Mr. Gleason home with me for a while?" she said to Libbie.

"No," answered Libbie stubbornly. "I can't have that. It would hurt him awfully if he thought I wanted him

to go. And we might not be able to get him back. He gets notions, you know. That would be hard for you, and hard for us, too. We like him, and he likes us."

"Well——" Averil did not really want the old man in her house. Hubert was at home now, because of the school holiday, and she was feeling the relief and pleasure of a placid home. She worked hard in the house and in the garden, but the work was not in any sense a burden. They had a more expansive way of living, now that the winter did not crowd them into limited quarters. Alec had bought a car, as he had intended, and he came over in it from time to time and stayed for supper, and then they all went out on the lake, keeping, by tacit agreement, the side farthest from Willard's grave. Alec took Bert out sometimes in the car, to the ecstatic delight of the boy; but Averil did not like to go, lest there should be too much talk. She was beginning to enjoy a peaceful existence, such as she had not known for years. She even began to forget her own forebodings.

The old man would be, in spite of his humility and gentleness, something of an intruder upon the quiet of the house. He would complicate the simple domestic life almost beyond endurance. Yet Averil, because she was sorry for Libbie, and because she comprehended to some degree how the old man could suffer at the hands of Benjamin, broached the subject again before the summer was over. "I'd just as lief take him, really I would," she said, arguing to herself that this was true, because her desire to help overruled her fear of annoyance.

Libbie was stirring up a cake, to be baked when the supper-fire was hot. Her back was toward her caller.

"No need," she said briefly. Her shoulders sagged as with a weight too heavy.

"You don't seem very well," said Averil. The truth flashed over her as she spoke. There was a voluble pause. "Is it—are you——" Averil stammered, rising from her chair, and going over to the other woman standing at the table.

Libbie looked over her shoulder and nodded, tears welling to her eyes.

Averil put her arm around her friend. "Oh, I'm sorry!" was all that she could say.

Libbie, breathing hard to keep back the sobs, leaned for a minute against the firmness of Averil's shoulder and breast. "It don't seem as if—as if I could stand it," she whispered. "But then, of course I know I can." She steadied herself, and fumbled for the flour-sifter. She could not see it for tears.

"Oh, dear, oh, dear!" Averil was murmuring, aghast. She felt horrified, ashamed, almost, as if she were regarding something unnatural and revolting. Later she tried to shake off the feeling. "It's probably all right," she said to herself. "Maybe she still cares for him. How anyone could is beyond me—but women are so unreasonable and silly." She could not keep the matter out of her mind. She brooded over it almost as intensely as if the trouble had been her own. For there was more to it than Elizabeth Hunt's predicament and her despair. There was the whole problem of wives and husbands, and of mothers and children. When she saw Libbie again, Benjamin Hunt had gone, leaving behind him a different household from the one which he had invaded as his own.

It was early in August. Cooler days had come, and the anguish of stifling weather on the farm was mitigated. There was money in the house, the return for

hay sold from the meadow, and for strawberries and garden produce taken to the country store. Libbie lay in bed, weak and ill, in spite of the fresh wind blowing through the window. Benjamin was dressing in his leisurely way, combing his hair fastidiously over the bald spot at the back of his head, trimming his pointed brown beard to the shape which he most approved. Libbie gave an involuntary groan. Benjamin stared at her as he put on his coat. "If you're going to be like this," he said coolly, "there isn't very much for me to stay at home for. A wife that's ailing and complaining is the surest means of driving a man out of his house."

"Oh, Ben! Don't talk like that," protested Libbie. With an effort she got up and began to dress.

Benjamin was out nearly all day, fishing in the brook which ran through the meadow behind the house. He brought in a string of speckled trout. "How's that for a millionaire's meal?" he laughed, displaying them. "Nobody cooks them better than you do."

"But they're out of season, Ben," said Libbie, frowning with distress. "You shouldn't do it. It ain't right."

"Of course they're out of season," retorted the man. "That's the sauce that'll make them perfect. You go on and cook them for your poor hungry husband. You always were too moral."

Libbie cooked them to the brown perfection of which she was master. Her consort ate heartily of them, praising her skill. At dusk he sauntered out. The family sat on the porch, not missing him. At bedtime he was gone. They did not see him again. The money was gone, too; and some little trinkets were missing—relics of an earlier and more prosperous day.

Elizabeth Hunt sat down on the back steps, and cried

hysterically, crushing down her sobbing breaths, lest the old man should hear. Caddie laid her head against her mother's in an agonized attempt at consolation. "Don't, don't cry, mother," she pleaded. "We can get along. He didn't help us much—and we can earn more money." After a pause she added, "I—I didn't think you cared so awfully to have him here."

Elizabeth shuddered. "I didn't—I don't," she answered, gasping. "It isn't that. It's something else."

"What else?" Caddie tightened her caressing arm along her mother's shoulder."

"I can't tell you now." Libbie bent her head to her knees and gave herself up to such weeping as only heartbreak can excuse. Carraline, baffled and trembling, could only hold her close and murmur terrified endearments. She had never before seen her mother give way to despair.

* * * * *

A short time afterward, Alec came to Libbie again, about Caddie's going to school. "Have you thought it over?" he asked. "I suppose we ought to be planning on it."

"Yes, I've thought it over," answered Mrs. Hunt with reluctance. "I can't, Alec—I can't spare her."

Alec looked crestfallen. "Oh, I'm sorry," he said. "I'm terribly sorry. I'd been kind of counting on it."

Libbie could not conceal her distress. "You can't be any more sorry than I am," she replied. "It would mean so much to Caddie. I couldn't think of letting you do it, if it wasn't for that. But even so, I can't let her go away. I'll need her this winter——"

"I know——" Alec frowned miserably.

"I can't say any more," said Libbie in a constrained voice.

There was something, Alec saw, which she could not tell, some mysterious reason why she refused his offer of help. Perhaps she was even prouder than he thought. Perhaps she feared neighbourhood comment, in which case she was less independent than he supposed.

"I see," he said. But he did not see; and he went away sorrowful, troubled about Carraline and her prospects in life. It was a long time before the truth dawned upon him as to the reason for Libbie's refusal.

CHAPTER III

WINTER had come on, a nipping winter, too, with flurries of snow, and fierce sudden drops of temperature to far below the freezing point. It was almost a year since Willard had gone. Life had settled into an acquiescence to his removal, had gone on without him in a calmer way; yet in a sense he was never for a moment forgotten.

One evening Hubert had been over at the Hunts'. He came in, rather late, after his walk home in the moonlight, and found Alec McLean sitting with his mother in the front room. There was something still and solemn about them, but something so surcharged with emotion that Bert stood looking at them in surprise and vague expectation, as he took off his mittens beside the stove. For a while there was no speech, except his muttered, "Gee! It's cold!" The silence made him look at the two people. He saw them anew: his mother, handsome in her sombre way, sitting in the lamplight, with her black silk blouse turned in at the neck and frilled with white lace, in which shone an old coral brooch. Her hands, strangely white and smooth in spite of hard work, lay in her lap, resting, it seemed, after struggle. Alec was not smoking. A cigar, not lighted, lay on the table. He was leaning back in his chair, his solid figure relaxed, his hands quiescent, his fresh youngish face serious, determined, but awed, as

with an inner absorption, a remembrance of something terrible, an anticipation of something good.

Both he and Averil seemed to have forgotten Bert. The clock in the other room ticked sharply, the logs in the stove fell down with a muffled noise. There was no other sound on the still night. After a while Alec roused himself. "Cold, is it?" he said. "Yes, winter's here in real earnest again. Well, I must be getting along." He rose reluctantly. His face was quiet. "Good night, Bert," he added, without seeming actually to look at the boy. Averil rose. She and Alec went out into the other room. Bert, left standing by the stove, felt awkward and embarrassed; he did not know why. He heard the other two speaking in low tones, as they stood at the door. There was a wordless moment full of meaning, before the door opened and shut, with good nights not casually spoken.

Averil did not come back at once. Bert, glancing at a paper, heard her locking the door and putting wood into the stove, preparing the house for the night. When she came back her face still wore the strange look which he had noted. He talked, but she hardly listened. They went to bed. It was Saturday night.

Bert always liked Sunday morning. He got up later than on week days, and there was some special treat for breakfast. There was no hurrying to get the chores done and start off for school.

This morning, after breakfast, and before the chores were done, Averil stood beside the window, looking out. Her back was toward the boy. "Bertie," she said, her voice coming thickly, "I've got something to tell you."

"Mm-huh," mumbled the lad. He had risen from the table, and was yawning and stretching. He was going

on fourteen now, and was growing into a solid, compact fellow, not devoid of the clumsiness of youth. He had no idea of what his mother was going to say.

"Alec and I are going to be married," said Averil.

Bert stood petrified. He was scarcely aware that he had heard. He was dazed; he said nothing. Averil turned and looked obliquely at him. "Didn't you hear me, Bertie?" she said. "Alec and I are going to be married."

"Mm-huh," mumbled the boy again. He felt strange. He did not know that he had grown pale. He felt as he had done when he came on Alec and Willard in the woods—as if everything were falling down around him. He was like one in a dream, unable to move or adjust himself to catastrophe.

"Well?" said Averil tremulously. "Can't you say something?"

Bert shook his head. Tears started to his eyes. His hands were shaking. He was surprised at himself, at the suddenness of this odd emotion which held him. It was not exactly hate of Alec, but an inexplicable antagonism toward him, a blurred reaction against this high-handed performance, taking his mother away without so much as by-your-leave. Bert had never felt jealousy before. To-day it welled up in his soul, and all but overwhelmed him.

"Don't you think it will be—nice?" faltered the woman.

Again Bert shook his head.

"What's the matter, child?" Averil came to him, and put out a hand, to lay it on his arm. He shook her off. Dropping into his chair beside the table, he put his arm down among the plates and cups, pushing them aside

recklessly; and bent his head upon it, while he shook stormily with almost tearless sobs. He was wrenched by feelings so new and violent as to be terrifying. Averil stood beside him, her hand now on his shoulder. "Bertie, Bertie!" She spoke in an astonished voice. "Don't you *like* Alec?"

"No—no—no!" he heard himself say. He wondered why he said it, but at the moment, he could not for the life of him admit that he liked Alec.

"Why, yes, you do," cried Averil in alarm. "You've always liked him so much."

Bert shook his head savagely, disclaiming any affection for his mother's prospective bridegroom.

"Why—why"—Averil spoke with pain and amaze—"I thought you did."

"I did like him, but I don't now," sobbed Hubert. In a way he was glad he was crying. Breaking down in such a childish manner was in distinct defiance to the advice of this Mr. McLean, who had instructed him to be a man, no matter what happened.

"Don't you want me to marry him?"

"No!"

"I thought—I thought you'd be pleased."

Bert could not dissect his feelings. There was an instinctive sense of something shocking in his mother's talk of marriage, so soon after her husband's death, even though in his life Willard had become so great a menace. There was also the dread of change, the shrinking from the new domination of a father, no matter if it were the easy tyranny of Alec. Most of all, there was the jealousy of this new relationship, of the assurance with which a man made bold to step in between mother and son. Bert had never known how much he

had clung to Averil, how completely he had lived his whole life in her. To lose her or to share her was unbearable and impossible.

Averil, grasping something of all this, though neither she nor Bert could have expressed it, ceased to argue with him, but stood beside the chair, drooping, her hands hanging. After a while, she began picking up the dishes, and getting them ready to wash. Bert sat crouched with his forehead on his arm, not saying anything, hardly moving. At last he rose, wiping his eyes and nose furtively, and stumbled to the kitchen door, where his cap hung on a peg. He put on his cap and his heavy reefer. The chores must be done, and he was glad to get out and away.

The feed for the chickens was on the back of the stove—a hot mash of potatoes, rye meal, and table scraps. He took up the kettle with a padded holder. He kept his eyes down. Averil, stirring soap into the dishwater, did not speak. He went out through the back kitchen and the shed. The sun was bright in his eyes. He went down the path with the heavy pot in his hand. He felt himself strangely moved again, and tears blurred his eyes, so that if he had not known with his feet each hummock and hollow of the path, he could not have gone on.

The fowls received their warm ration with chucklings and flappings of joy. Bert hardly noticed them. The horses whinnied at his approach, the cow gave her stolid evidence of satisfaction. He attended to them punctiliously, as he had been taught by Willard Faraday and Alec McLean, but he did not caress them nor converse with them, as heretofore. When he had finished, he set the pail of milk upon the floor, and climbed up into the

hayloft. It was cold there, but protected from the wind. Hunched in the sunshine from the dusty window in the gable, he sat for a long time, scarcely thinking. The doves in their box under the eaves fluttered, rustled, and murmured. There was the sound of the horses munching their feed, and the cow shifting her feet and chewing. Hubert gave himself up to a dreamy sullenness, withdrawn from the touches of his world.

After a time there came the ringing of the church bell at the village, regular and musical, a pleasant sound, full of sweetness and meaning. Hubert was cold. He wanted to go into the house, but he could not face his mother. He felt as if he and she were eternally separated, as by a great gulf.

He heard the barn door open, and then his mother calling him, below. He did not answer. She moved about. He heard her speak to the horses. Then she came climbing up the rough ladder to the loft. Her anxious face appeared, her head swathed in a knitted scarf. She stared blinkingly, and then saw the boy, shrinking into the hay. "Why, Bert!" she said, "I wondered what had become of you. Are you all right?"

"Yeah, I'm all right," replied the boy heavily.

"Why don't you come into the house? You'll freeze, out here." The woman spoke with pleading, as she clung precariously to the ladder.

"I ain't cold," answered Bert. But he was. He looked sternly before him, to keep from flinching.

"Oh, Bertie!" This was all Averil could say. She hung a moment, and began backing down the ladder. At the foot of it she called again, "Won't you come in? You can't stay here all day."

"Don't want to."

"You must. You can't stay here. It's too cold. We're going to have dinner after a while." It was, in fact, too early for dinner, but the mention of it might lure him. "Won't you come, Bertie?"

"We-ell." The boy got up stiffly, and shook the bits of hay from his clothes. He was cramped and aching. He shivered. Sullenly he let himself down the ladder, landing with a loud thump on the barn floor. They went into the house. Averil had taken up the pail of congealing milk, but he snatched it from her, with his half-frozen hands.

In the house they kept silence. Hubert sat down beside the stove in the front room. When he realized that he was in the chair which Alec had occupied the night before, he got up and moved to another. He took up a paper, and laid it down, tapped with his foot on the nickel rim of the stove. He went upstairs to his room and came down again. He wondered when his mother and Alec were to be married—whether it would be right away, or a long time hence. At the table, he spoke and answered, but only with an effort. After dinner, he said, "I'm going to walk down and see Jigs." Jigs was a friend of his in the village, and his name was George. Hubert did not like him especially well, but George had a box of tools and a camera.

"All right," said Averil. "But don't you want to hitch up and drive down?"

"Naw. Too much bother. I'll walk." Now that he had thought of it, Bert itched to be gone. He wished he might never come back.

He was gone a long time. The tools and the camera proved so interesting that he partly forgot his troubles. But on his return his footsteps were increasingly dull as

he approached the house—his house, as he thought without enthusiasm. Presently he was aware that Alec was coming to meet him. He wore his leather-lined overcoat, buttoned up closely, though one corner flew back and disclosed the smooth brown lining which Bert so much admired. Alec looked big and solid and prosperous.

"Hello, lad," he said, stopping in front of Bert.

"Hullo." Bert stopped, and kicked the snow, looking down.

"Your mother told you," said Alec.

"Yes."

"Don't you like it, boy?" asked Alec incredulously.

"We thought you would."

Bert shook his head, his chin down, his jaw dropping.

"Why not?"

Silence. Bert scuffed in the snow.

"Why not, Bert?"

"Don't know."

"Yes, you do. You must know why," persisted McLean.

"We're all right as we are," blurted the boy.

Alec stood looking down at him thoughtfully. He thrust his hands deep into his pockets. "See here," he said at last, as if with some hard determination, "I want to tell you something." There was a grimness in his tone which made the boy look up wonderingly. It was as if the man had steeled himself to a painful task. "See here," he repeated, "I'm—I'm——" But he did not finish. He stood irresolute. At last he said, "I'm your best friend, Bert. You know that."

Bert slumped at this anti-climax. His face was still sulky. "I s'pose so," he answered, as if he were not convinced.

"I don't wish you anything but good," Alec went on.

Bert knew that, but he could not say that he did. The two stood there in the snow for a long minute, the boy looking down at the path, and the man looking at him. The landscape was blue with the stealing dusk. After a while Alec spoke. "I want to marry your mother," he said slowly. "I think I can make her happier. It's hard for her here alone. You're not old enough to help her much. And she's had a hard time, these last years—a hard time. You know that." He paused. Bert nodded, winking back sudden tears. He knew the truth of what the man was saying. "Why should you stand in her way?" queried Alec. "Can you do more for her than I can?" Bert had not thought of this phase of the question. He shook his head. His mouth twitched. "You love her, too." Alec's voice was lower. "That's why you don't want me to take her, ain't it?"

The boy moved his head slowly up and down. He had not known until to-day how he felt about his mother, nor that he would have fought anyone who tried to take her away from him. "She's good to me," he said brokenly. "She's good——"

The face of the man showed deep emotion, in which fear had its part. "If you care for her like that," he replied, "you ought to want to see her better off. You ought to want to stand by her—no matter what she's done—or what she does, I mean."

Bert looked ashamed. He made a little noise of dubious assent.

"We aren't going to get married for a few months yet," Alec explained; "not until it's more than a year, you know." Bert felt comforted. "You'll have time to

get used to it. It'll be better, a good deal better, in the end, if we do get married. *I'll give you my word.*"

The boy gave a long sigh, and straightened his shoulders. He was partly reconciled to the idea of the marriage; so much so that he could go into the house with McLean, and sit with him and Averil in the front room and at the supper table. But he was glad that they had sense enough not to talk about him about their plans. Even now he could not have borne hearing such talk, and he must inevitably have given way to his emotions again in some childish manner.

* * * * *

Plans developed bit by bit. Averil was to go and live at Alec's, of course. Bert thought of the furniture in the unused rooms. He remembered how Alec had said, "God only knows whether I'll ever use it." Now it was going to be used. Averil would like it, too, for it was better than the things which the Faradays had accumulated during their married life. They had been less successful than McLean, in the way of money; and Willard had been severe in his tastes, and in his approval of Averil's modest ambitions.

Now Averil was more openly engaged in her preparations for the marriage, though she kept them secret from her neighbours. Bert was enjoined to say nothing. After his talk with Alec, on that Sunday afternoon, he had become gradually content to let the marriage go on. There was still in his mind a residue of distaste and resentment, not so much against Alec—his affection for the man had asserted itself again—as against an inexplicable force which was taking his mother away from him, and which had complicated the lives of four people

—Willard being still a recognizable member of the group.

The one person to whom he spoke was Carraline. He saw her nearly every day; for though she was not in school now, she was almost always at home, where he could stop and see her. She came over to his house, as often as she could, but she was closely occupied with housework and her devotion to the old man. Carraline was becoming almost as much a part of Hubert's life as his mother, a settled, accepted part of it, unquestioned and secure.

Caddie was fifteen now, and was acquiring a pretty air of maturity, which succumbed at times to girlish fits of teasing and giggling. For the most part she seemed unduly serious and preoccupied. Bert was annoyed sometimes at the soberness with which she greeted him, and the random responses which she made to his sallies of would-be wit, and even his more important remarks. On the whole, however, he could not complain of her loyalty and sympathy.

The old man, Grampa Gleason, was her special charge. In spite of his amazing strength, there were times when lassitude and depression kept him in his chair or in his bed. Whether he were ill or well, Caddie gave him unremitting care. She prepared his food when he needed or desired something different from the family fare. She kept his clothes washed and mended, and his best suit pressed. She took pleasure in seeing him dressed up on Sundays or holidays in his neat black, with a white collar and dark blue tie. He was not an unimposing figure, thus dignified; and he was no inconsiderable addition to a church-going party or a festive gathering. It was Caddie who saved the place for him in the vehicle, who indicated his position—not below the salt—at the

table, who drew him into the circle of talk, and who listened in private to his tales and jokes and called for a repetition of them before a larger audience.'

She took care of his room with scrupulous attention, saw that he had the best sheets and towels, a comfortable chair, a good light for reading. Since the return and departure of Benjamin Hunt, all the responsibility of the old man's well-being had shifted to her. She made it a point of honour not to abate one jot or tittle of her service to him, or to hurt his feelings by the slightest show of indifference or neglect.

"Caddie's my right hand man," the old fellow used to say. "She's a whole family to me, wife and sons and daughters and everything. I don't know how I'd get along without her. I couldn't, I guess. I'd just have to stop."

Caddie would slip her hand into his. "You're my grandpa," she would say, laughing. "He is, too," she said to Bert one day, after such an incident.

Bert stared. "Why, he ain't, either, you goosey," he made reply. "He ain't your grampa, any more than he's an Eskimo." He was rather proud of this comparison.

"Well, he is, too," Caddie reiterated. "It isn't just relations that count. I mean, it isn't just *being born* that counts—that makes you a relation to people."

Bert looked more perplexed. "Why, what is it, then?" he asked skeptically.

"It's the way you *feel* that they're relation," she made answer. "Sometimes you don't feel as if your own folks were related to you, at all. Mother says she never feels as if her brother Orson was any relation to her, because he's never paid any attention to her. And I feel as if my f—as if—well—I mean it seems as if some one that

wasn't any relation to you, was a real honest relation; and then they *are*," she declared vehemently.

"Pooh!" said Bert.

"That's what being relation *is*," expounded Carraline.

Bert wrinkled his nose, unpersuaded. "It seems funny," he said with doubt.

"It seemed so to me, until I talked with mother about it," answered Caddie cheerfully, "and thought about it for a while. You better think about it."

"Huh," commented Hubert, not without scorn. He proceeded to forget all about Carraline's queer philosophy of kinship.

He took occasion one day when he was at the Hunts' to tell Caddie his news about his mother. He was standing around the kitchen, and Carraline was putting clean papers on the cupboard shelves. "Say, what do you think?" he said in a low voice, subdued to the magnitude of his message.

"What?" Caddie stopped with the shears in her hands. She was cutting scalloped borders from old newspapers.

"My mother's going to marry Uncle Alec." Bert tried to make his words casual, but his voice trembled.

"She *is*?" Caddie laid the big shears down on the table and gasped.

"She's going to marry Uncle Alec," repeated Bert impressively.

"Well!"

If Carraline had not had so much to occupy her mind of late, this might not have been so new an idea. Her mother, however, had carefully refrained from suggesting it to her, and had manoeuvred to keep her from hearing any gossip which might be circulating. In fact,

she heard little herself, since she lived so busily, and in such a secluded way. "Married to Alec McLean!" Carraline had an absorbed look. "It seems awful queer—so soon——"

"It'll be over a year," said Bert quickly.

Caddie considered. "It ought to be *that* long," she asserted. "But——"

"But what?"

"Oh, I don't know." The girl went on cutting the paper. "I don't see why it isn't all right."

"Nobody said it wasn't all right," flared Bert. It was one thing to disapprove the marriage himself, and another thing to have some one else insinuate criticism.

"No, of course not," said Caddie hastily. "I was just thinking—but, anyway, you said it would be more than a year."

"Yes," said Bert. "We aren't telling anyone about it yet, of course."

"Of course not." Carraline felt the importance of being a confidante. "You're glad, aren't you? I mean, glad they're going to——"

"I—I don't know," murmured the boy. "I guess so."

"You like Mr. McLean," said Caddie, beginning to fit her paper to the shelves. "It seems as if he was kind of like—that is, more like a father to you than your own father. Doesn't it?" She peered at him over her shoulder.

"Maybe so," said Bert reluctantly. He watched her folding and snipping the paper.

"Your father was pretty hard to get along with," remarked Caddie.

"Yes."

"And Alec—Mr. McLean—has always been good to

you. I should think you'd be *glad*," the girl burst out, almost with passion.

"I guess I am," admitted Bert. Perhaps he was, after all.

"And you see what I mean by relations," added Caraline, beginning to cut scallops on another sheet of paper.

"Mm," said Bert. He wasn't going to admit that, no matter what she said.

On the way home, he reflected that Caddie was rather tiresomely insistent on a foolish idea. He dismissed it with the patronizing tolerance of the male.

He thought about his father, and wondered whether he knew what was going on. How he would hate this marriage! And how impotent he was, supposing that he knew! But how could he know? If what they had put away in the ground were all, that could take no cognizance of proceedings in the upper world. And if there were a shadowy, mysterious Willard, away in some remote and happy land, that couldn't very well know, either. Hubert gave up the problem, and thought about something else.

* * * * *

The next day, he said to his mother, the question having just dawned on him, "What you going to do with this place?"

"Why, it's really yours, Bertie," she answered. Her face was serener than it had been.

Bert looked blank. "I'd forgotten that."

"What do you want to do with it?" asked Averil.

The boy pondered. Then he said eagerly, "Why can't we leave it as it is?"

Averil showed her pleasure. "That's just what I wanted," she said. "I somehow don't care to take much of anything with me—just a few of my own things—the looking-glass that was Auntie's, and mother's cherry table, and my sewing machine—I bought that with my own money—and maybe one or two other things. I'd be glad to leave all the rest," she supplemented, with a tinge of bitterness in her tone.

Bert assented. He understood that she might not want to take things that reminded her of Willard. It came to him, too, that here would always be a refuge for him, if the new home should prove to be no home at all. It was a comfort to him to know that the rooms were to be kept furnished, and that no one else would step into the house when Averil went away.

CHAPTER IV

WHEN Libbie Hunt's baby came, late in January, there were, as is usually the case, love and forgiveness prepared for it, and a place to nestle. Since it was not to blame for its existence, it could not be denied a welcome. Averil and old Doctor Frame were the ministrants at the natal hour, with Caddie white and tense in the background, and the old man heaping wood on the fires and hovering near the telephone.

For weeks before, and now for weeks afterward, the brunt of the household management and toil had come upon Carraline. She accepted it uncomplainingly, and worked constantly and hard. The old man helped her as much as he could; but there were times, in spite of his eagerness to show his value, when he was ailing and inefficient, when Caddie must shovel the paths, bring in the wood, and care for the animals about the place, in addition to the cooking, sweeping, and other work which the house demanded. The neighbours did what they could for her, but they had their own cares, and there were times when they did not know what was going on at the isolated little house. Sometimes the Hendrickses took the girl to church with them, or to a school entertainment; and Alec McLean insisted on her riding to the village with him, now and then, when he was going down for supplies and coming back at once.

But it was a hard time for Caddie,—a fact which she could not conceal, even from herself. Her consolations

were John-Benjy, and Flora May. There seemed to be a compensatory element in her affection for the baby—as if there were something to make up, both to Flora May and herself; to the baby for being called into a chilly world where there were already too many babies, to Carraline for being kept out of the world of joyous youth.

Libbie seemed different from the old Libbie. She was thinner, more sober, almost broken. She never referred to the vanished Benjamin. There had not been a word from him since that August evening on which he had disappeared. Probably, as Alec said to Averil, he had gone South again for the winter.

One day Averil drove over, securely wrapped against the cold. She was bringing half of her own batch of doughnuts and a meat loaf—thinking to lighten the household burden for Caddie. Few visitors came to the little house drifted round with snow, holding in its narrow confines all there is of life, from new birth to old age. It kept off, precariously, the brutality of the cold, and preserved, by a pitiful margin, the dignities of existence.

Averil found Libbie sitting close to the heating-stove in the sitting-room. She was holding the baby. There was frost upon the windows, and Caddie's geraniums, now moved to a box near the stove, showed the effects of frigid nights. The plain dingy room was as clean as women's hands could make it. The baby slept in her mother's arms, the blue-white eyelids closed, the small solemn face turned against the breast. Averil, bending over the child, had a feeling of the strangeness of the little creature, with its hold on life so slender, yet so strong. "Dear little thing!" she said impulsively.

.

"Yes, isn't she?" murmured Libbie. Her face worked. "Oh, Averil, how do we dare—how do we *dare*?"

"You mean"—Averil comprehended—"dare to bring them here——"

"Yes. I think of it while I sit here. It seems so—so terrible, somehow."

Averil walked to the window and stood there, to hide her face from her friend. "I've thought about it, too," she said; "thousands of times. It is terrible, to bring them here without their asking, and then let them suffer for it. Sometime I feel as if I couldn't bear thinking about it."

"It crushes me, almost," said Libbie, hardly above a whisper. "My poor children—my poor little baby——"

Averil came back from the window, and laid her hand on the woman's shoulder. "I don't know of anybody that has more to give them than you have," she said. Libbie shook with her effort to control herself. The baby stirred and whimpered.

Averil took the food to the kitchen, where Carraline was working, in a cloud of tobacco smoke from the old man's pipe. The atmosphere seemed to the visitor detestable. Willard had not smoked, and Alec's pipe did not seem to give out such an aggressive smell.

When she went back to the sitting-room, Libbie was able to smile at her again. Averil sat down. "I can't keep the horse standing," she said, "even if he is in the shed, with a blanket on. I've got something to tell you. Maybe you know."

"Maybe," answered Libbie, tucking the grey shawl closer around the child.

"Alec and I——"

"Yes."

"We're going to be married." Averil brought out her news breathlessly.

"Yes. I thought so." Libbie's face brightened.

"Well?"

"It's as it should be. I'm glad," said Libbie.

"It's a year now," Averil went on. "It'll be more, when——"

"Yes, there's no use in waiting. I'm glad for both of you," Libbie said, reaching out her hand for Averil's. "Alec has needed someone to make a home for him, this long time. And you need someone, too, and so does Bert."

"Yes." Averil thoughtfully straightened a fold of her skirt. "But——"

"You mean, it isn't what you need, so much as what you want?"

"That's it," Averil returned. "I've had a hard life, Libbie—such a hard life. I couldn't tell anyone." She held her lips tightly together to keep them from quivering.

"I know it," answered Elizabeth slowly. "I know. It must have been hard."

"Maybe I've made the hard part for myself," hesitated Averil. "I'm not blaming anybody."

"We all do," said the other. "But I can't see what good it does to keep torturing ourselves. What's done is done. The thing is, to do better, and *be* better." There was a pause. "When do you think it will be—the wedding, I mean?"

"In about a month," said Averil.

"You want time to get settled, before the spring work begins," said Libbie practically.

"Yes."

"How does Bert feel about it?"

"He hasn't said anything?"

"Not a word, to me. If he's said anything to Caddie, she hasn't peeped." Libbie showed her pride in the fact that Caddie could be close-mouthed.

"He didn't like it at first," said Averil; "but he feels all right now, I guess." They talked for a few moments about plans for the wedding. "You'll come, won't you?" asked Averil. "There won't be anyone except you and the Hendrickses and the minister and his wife."

"I'll try to. Someone'll have to stay at home," Libbie returned. She took Averil's hand again, and held it. "I hope, I do hope that you'll be happy. Get away from the past, and begin over again."

Averil shuddered. "Can we get away from it? Oh, Libbie, sometimes I'm so scared——"

"Don't be," said Libbie soothingly. "Don't be scared. I guess we've got to have lots of courage in this life of ours."

"I'm afraid I haven't got as much as you have," murmured Averil. "Well, I must go on. I'll telephone you every day; but you know that isn't much use, for folks listen in so." She kissed Libbie good-bye, and dropped a swift caress upon the cheek of the baby.

* * * * *

The marriage of Averil and Alec took place in March. It was a quiet ceremony in Averil's front room, in the house beside the lake. The bride wore a grey silk dress, which had come from a mail-order house. There was something meek and tamed about her in the grey silk, with lace at the neck, and the coral brooch which had

been her mother's. Her dark hair was parted and twined at the back, her face was creamy white; her eyes burned with unwonted lustre. Alec stood up solidly beside her, the prosperous farmer with the air of the misplaced sailor. Bert was transfixed by the hush and solemnity of it all. The words which the crude young minister pronounced took on a dignity which had nothing to do with the graceless figure in the ill-fitting clothes, even as the great events in life transcend their poor human expression.

Bert stayed with the Hunts while Alec and Averil went away for a week in Milwaukee and Chicago. The house beside the lake was temporarily deserted. The potatoes had been sold, and the stock had been moved to Alec's farm. Bert was happy at the Hunts'. He went to school every day. He had never become quite reconciled to Caddie's not going, and now it seemed as if she ought to start off with him every morning. "I've got plenty of other things to do," she laughed, scrubbing John-Benjy's face. "But I don't say I'm not wishing I could go." After school and in the evenings, he tried to help around the place as much as he could, and he and Caddie teased and taunted each other like naughty children. Carraline was almost herself again.

Bert liked the old man more than ever, and listened spell-bound to tales of an earlier age. There were giants in those days, it seemed, and men and women who were marvels of beauty and industry and wisdom.

One day during the week, Bert went over to the house beside the lake, to get clean clothing, and a treasure or two which he had left behind. He persuaded Carraline to go along. They tramped the slushy spring

prints on the walls. To the boy it all seemed elegant and impressive. He revelled secretly in the space and freedom, so different from the quality of Willard Faraday's dwelling with its narrowness and gloom.

After the elaborate supper which Mrs. Gundersen pressed upon them, the three who now constituted the family wandered through the warm bright rooms; Averil and Alec were still in their best clothes, symbols of ease and prosperity and the wisdom of the outer world. Alec had the air of a man who has come into his own. He laughed a great deal, throwing his head back and showing his white teeth; but there was more than hilarity in his manner and his look. There was the blessedness of achievement, after long and painful waiting, and there was the watchfulness which resolves to keep what it has heretofore renounced with hunger beyond words.

"Like it, lad?" he said to Bert from time to time.

"Sure, I do," Bert answered, beaming. He liked it more than he could tell.

In their rounds they came to the picture of Alec's mother, hanging beside the secretary in the sitting-room. McLean took it down and looked at it, and then handed it to Averil. She nodded, and put it back hastily upon its nail. Bert hardly noticed the incident at the time, though long afterward it came to him again with the vividness which often marks erratic flashes of memory.

The evening seemed to have no flaw in its contentment. But after Bert had gone to bed in his big comfortable room, and after he had been dozing or asleep, there came to him through half-opened doors the sound of his mother's voice suddenly raised, and the cry, "Oh, Alec, I'm afraid!" Then came the man's voice, not

ridiculing, but reasoning; and the stealthy shutting of a door. How silly women were, thought Hubert in the daze between sleeping and waking. Here was his mother, safely guarded within walls, and getting scared of burglars or crazy men, or something like that, when there wasn't the least iota to be afraid of. It was queer, for she had been so brave in the house beside the lake, when there had been a good deal more to be afraid of, if one wanted to be so foolish. He couldn't bother to think about it, for he was too sleepy, and the bed certainly was more comfortable than the one he had had at home.

The spring came on now, with what appeared unequalled wonder and swiftness. The wild geese were flying early. White blossoms burst forth suddenly on hard grey twigs. Loveliness unfolded week by week. Hubert's heart unfolded, too, in contentedness and affection. He was happier than he had hoped to be, at Uncle Alec's house. The miseries of the past seemed quite effaced. Yet there was a little motion of homesickness somewhere within his soul, which impelled him to go back to the old place. It was his own, anyhow, he argued, and he had to go back often, to see how it was getting along. It was easy to make excuses, especially when the men began repairing fences and spreading fertilizers and making ready for the sowing of seed. Bert did not always go in. The stillness of the house continued to appal him. But he hoped to conquer this childishness of fear, and he was willing in the meantime to let the old house draw him with its force of association, subtle and unexplained. And always, on his way over or back, he turned aside to see the Hunts, who

roads together, cheerfully discoursing of matters light in weight. Bert felt an odd sense of being a stranger, as he walked up the lane to the house. Although nothing had been changed, it had an unlived-in appearance, inexplicable considering the short time which had elapsed since its inmates had departed. "It seems queer," said Bert, catching his breath. "It don't look any different, but it don't seem like the same place."

"I guess it's just because your mother isn't there," said Carraline understandingly. "It's surprising, what a lot of difference a mother makes."

Bert had no answer to this, feeling the self-consciousness which a savour of sentiment arouses in a half-grown boy. He unlocked the side door, and they went in. The living-room was stiffly in order, but unnatural looking. Mrs. Hendricks had lingered, after the departure of the bride and groom, to make things tidy. The air was cold, with the chill of a house unwarmed for the better part of a week. Outside, the eaves were dripping with a loud *plop, plop*, and the sound echoed hollowly through the house. A stick of wood shifted its position in the stove, jarred by the footsteps of the intruders. It was all that Bert could do to force himself up the stairs to his room. The closed door of his father's room seemed to hide mysterious and horrid possibilities. His hands were unsteady as he fumbled in the dresser drawers for clean shirts and stockings. One or two other things he decided he could get along without. He dashed downstairs again, whistling valiantly, to signify his entire freedom from fear. He found Carraline reading a magazine, oblivious of the thing which had given him an attack of nerves.

This short visit to the place which had been his home

during all of his fourteen years made him the more eager for his mother's return, and the new interests and companionships which he was to find in Uncle Alec's house.

Alec and Averil McLean came back on Monday afternoon. They had left their Ford at the county seat where they had taken the train, and they drove back home in it, stopping at the Hunts' to take Bert along. They left a present for Carraline; and Bert suspected the contents of various parcels stowed away in the car, feeling an assurance that he was to share in the trophies of the honeymoon. Averil was wearing her new blue coat, and a hat so smart and becoming that it could have been purchased only in a metropolis. She looked handsome, glowing, and gratified, though the experiences of life had subdued her to a soberness even in ecstasy. The way in which the two received him gave Bert a moment of pride, and he felt all at once as if he "fitted in" to the new life, in a way which he had hardly expected. The bustle of homecoming was sweet to him, sweeter even than the unwrapping of parcels and the discovery of countless treasures, topped off with the magnificence of a silver watch, almost the counterpart of the one which lay silent under the icy waters of the lake.

Bert felt a wordless pleasure in the aspect of the new home. Averil had been over once or twice, before the wedding, to superintend the arrangement of the furnishings which Alec had bought, and the old mahogany which he had inherited. She was not skilled in art, but she had not taken the women's magazines for nothing, and she had the natural taste of simplicity. There were some inoffensive rugs, a shaded lamp or two, a few old

stopped their round of drudgery to give him smiles of welcome and the boon of pleasant speech.

* * * * *

The years went on now with tranquillity. The manner of life on the farm was prosperous and genial. The war was on. Prices were good. Alec fretted at times about his remoteness from the scenes of action; but he was too old to go to war, and Bert was too young, and the country needed food, and that was about all there was to be said. There were two automobiles on the place, one for utility and one for pleasure. A furnace had been installed in the house. Then a pumping apparatus was put in at the edge of the brook, so that all the buildings on the farm could have water-pressure and modern plumbing. These things were the talk of the countryside for a month. There were other improvements and comforts as time went on, better rugs and dishes, new curtains, a Victrola. Alec and Averil went about but little in the neighbourhood: there were still people who regarded them with suspicion. But they went for long rides in their car, sometimes staying over night or two or three days. They went to the village to church (there was a new minister now, an older man); they drove the eight or nine miles to the county seat with increasing frequency. Mrs. Gundersen had a young Danish girl to help her about the house. Averil did no hard work, and she had good clothes—a fur coat, and silk dresses.

Hubert was growing, developing, thinking. He went for four years to the High School at the county seat, coming home for week-ends and holidays. He was shy and quiet, but he did well enough in his studies for a

boy not bookishly inclined. He made friends among the boys and girls, enjoyed the merrymakings in his serious way, gained a working knowledge of life in town, among a variety of people. He followed in a dim way the course of the war, marched in parades, despised the Germans, and listened solemnly to the prevailing talk, both wise and witless, on the subjects of Liberty Bonds, relief for the Belgians, and Red Cross drives.

He was always glad, at the end of the school week, to find Alec or Henry Gundersen waiting for him in the Ford, at the High School door, and he rejoiced in every moment which he could spend either at the McLean place, or at the old Faraday home. If bad weather or some special school event necessitated his staying over Sunday in town, he felt as if he had lost something, and had been unjustly treated.

Several times during the school course, Alec McLean asked him anxiously, "What profession are you thinking of going in for, my lad? Is there anything you'll be wanting to study for?" There were means forthcoming, Hubert knew, for any occupation which he should choose; but for three years he had to answer, "Don't know yet." It did not seem worth while to hurry in deciding; there was plenty of time. Then all at once he knew. When Alec asked him again, he was ready with his reply, "I want to farm it, here, just as you do."

"Good!" McLean was delighted. The prospect of sending the boy away had been intolerable.

Hubert knew now that he wanted to be back here beside the lake. Here was his place. Here was his mother; and here his stepfather, whose kindness exceeded that of many fathers. And also, here was Caddie. Slowly, slowly, deep down within him, Hubert knew,

without admitting, that Carraline Hunt was the core and centre of his life. She was always where he went to seek her, working deftly, steadily, uncomplainingly; always saving her mother, caring for the children, petting the old man, Grampa Gleason; always dependable, understanding, and humane. Though she was ready with her smiles, her face was wistful, with a still brooding, an inner desire, for something more satisfying than the life she led. Bert saw nothing of this. He saw only the girl Carraline, who mothered and teased him, and listened to his tales of school and home with unflagging interest and unvarying ardour of response.

When he was eighteen, and had just finished his course in the High School at the county seat, Hubert spent the summer at home, working his own farm, under Alec's directions. He was awakening to the glory of having the place for his very own. During the years since Averil's marriage, the house had been left as it had always been. Hubert had come and gone; and on occasion hired men had been lodged there, and meals had been prepared for harvesters, threshers, or woodcutters.

Little had been done toward the upkeep of the place, and now Hubert applied himself to the task of renovation. He repaired the sagging porch, put in new window panes, mended the steps and the trellis at the side door, trimmed the overhanging boughs and bushes, and in hours snatched from other labours, painted the house a fresh white, and the shutters green. So entranced was he with the result, and with the possibilities of indoor improvements, that he lived most of the summer "baching it" in the old home. He had lost his

fear of silences, and found that the air of desertion vanished when he had lived there steadily for a week. The acquisition of fowls to clack and chatter, and of a dog to growl protectingly or *woof-woof* at friendly approaches, gave the crowning touches of homeliness to his domicile. He came to love its quietness and freedom. He loved the summer mornings when he set out his breakfast on the kitchen table, and ate looking out across his fields, low and rich, hardly above the level of the lake. He wondered why his father had not made more money, with such good land. He reflected that there was not a great deal of it—at least compared with Alec McLean's—and prices had been low in the earlier days when Willard had lived on the farm. There was something unlucky about his father, too, something that did not make for prosperity or happiness. He had striven furiously at his tasks, somehow defeating his own purpose of success. Bert recalled the advice which he had heard from the lips of his stepfather, "Keep clean, rest often, find the cool spots." It was good advice. Alec had done well by taking it himself. Bert remembered his father's insatiable frenzy of work, his sweat and grime, his obstinate moiling in the blazing sun. How futile it had been! He might have taken things more easily, saved himself a deal of suffering, and things probably would have turned out just as well; or just as badly, perhaps one ought to say.

Bert's own life on the farm was comfortable and undisturbed. He liked to cook his own meals—of new potatoes and peas from the garden, and chops from the meat-man's wagon—finished off with Mrs. Gundersen's pies or Carraline's chocolate cake. He liked the hours

of hard work, remitted into seasons of rest and dreaming. He delighted in his cool swim in the lake, and his fresh clothes, after the day's work was done.

The best place for swimming was down at the little point beyond Willard Faraday's grave. Bert had long since vanquished his fear of going past it, but not his shrinking. Every spring his mother said to him, "You'll look after the little graveyard, Bertie," and he answered with assent. He straightened and strengthened the picket fence, trimmed the evergreens, and pulled away encroaching weeds. There was a low headstone now, suitably engraved, and a square footstone with an *F* on it. This summer Hubert decided to give the plot a more careful going-over, that it might take on a quality of newness in harmony with the house.

He chose a Sunday morning in June. It was early: he had found that he could not sleep late on these alluring mornings. He had had his breakfast and washed his dishes. He was a big boy, a man in appearance, with wide shoulders and a solid form, not stocky, but well knit. His grey eyes had a straight and honest gaze, but shy, never audacious nor aggressive. His light brown hair was soft and easily disordered. It annoyed him by blowing about in the slightest breeze. On this particular morning he was dressed for his work in a blue chambray shirt, open at the neck, khaki trousers, buttoned in at the knee, and stout woollen stockings. He was carrying the tools requisite for his task.

The lake was absolutely calm, every tamarack-tip and green sedge point reflected in it, dimmed by the faint haze of morning, which would be gone in another hour. The hemlocks, as ever, made a menacing shade,

which might conceal anything. Bert walked firmly through the young blueberry bushes and curling fronds of ferns, and little yellow grass-flowers. Farther down the path, his shoulders brushed the hazel bushes with honeysuckle climbing over them, and the poetic amelanchier shrubs, with heavy-scented white sprays of blossoms hanging among the leaves. He was half-conscious of the nameless sounds of a summer morning—chirping and thrilling and chattering.

He reached the place, between the path and the shore. He leaned against the post at the corner, and looked over into the small enclosed plot. Vines were growing along the fence; a picket or two had loosened during the winter. The oldest headstone, with the date of 1853, had lurched sidewise. Willard's headstone was firm and white and new-looking. Purple irises were in bloom beside it, and partridgeberry vines had crept over the concrete base. It was softened by verdure and bloom. There was not much to do, the boy decided, except to cut a few of the more vigorous bushes, rake the grass, and pull a weed or two. The fence and the older headstones, marking forgotten lives, needed attention. He stood staring down. He could see the name, *Willard Faraday*, and the date of that bitter day at the last of the year—a day which he had always shut out of his memory when he could.

He recalled the scene, the snow, heaped almost even with his head, the dark frozen soil, the whirling cutting flakes, driven by the gale, the shivering little group, the young minister, muffled in his cheap coat, raising his voice in what seemed unavailing prayer. What did it all mean? The mind of the boy went back to the year preceding his father's death. He recalled the wrath

and anguish on the face of the man. He seemed never to remember his milder moods, but always his periods of sternness or of rage.

What had his father been so angry about? Why had he made them all so miserable? There was no knowing what might have happened, if he had not been taken away. Was he merely growing insane, driven by some inexplicable fatality of inheritance? Or was there something in his life which nobody knew, which harassed him beyond endurance? Hubert searched the past, baffled but intent. What was there in the simple life of the farm which could torture a man, and rouse him to an agony of passion, which he wreaked on those he loved?

Was it debt? Surely not, for he had died solvent, and had left a respectable patrimony to his boy. Was it unsatisfied ambition? This seemed unlikely, for he had never known that Willard had expressed a desire for a broader life. Was there another woman? Here Hubert paused. He knew about such things now, and the miseries of illicit love. Newspapers and magazine stories were copious and explicit on these matters. Could there have been some other woman, whom Willard loved above his wife? Hubert cast about for some support for this romantic suggestion. He could find nothing. There was no woman who could have come closely into Willard's experience, except Libbie Hunt, and Martin Hendricks' wife, and the blowsy Mrs. Jensen.

Bert thought of the plump, hardworking Mrs. Hunt, even as she had been five or six years ago, before she had grown so weary and faded with toil. He shook his head. No, there was nothing in that. If there had

been a woman, it must have been someone whom Willard met in secret, or whom he had known back, far back in the days before he and Averil had come to make their home beside the lake. Perhaps, the boy thought, sighing, Willard was just "naturally mean," as he had heard people say of others, and there was no use in hunting for a reason for his behaviour. Yet, after all, there might have been something—— He thought of his mother, handsome in her early middle age, sheltered and provided for now, after her hard lean years. He perused her life as it was revealed to him; and saw her not happy, even yet. Not infrequently her face was strained with suffering, a hidden anxiety, a mark of uncertainty and fear. He remembered how, on the night of her return from her wedding trip, she had cried out in a tone of anguish, "Oh, Alec, I'm afraid!" He had laughed then at the silly timidity of women. He knew now that she had been afraid of some terror which might come upon her, not of darkness or marauders. Afraid of what? Was there something hidden in her life, too?

He thought of Alexander McLean, the solid good-looking man, not old for all his forty-two years—which seem so numerous to eighteen: boyish, friendly, laughing, substantial, successful as success went in his provincial world, yet not happy, either, as it dawned upon the boy with slow incredulous surprise. There were nights, summer nights like the one just passed, when Alec could not sleep, but walked up and down on the sward in front of the house, or strode off on long blind excursions through the fields; times, too, when he was haggard and speechless, when his shoulders sagged, and the colour

in his cheeks was dulled; when he looked at Hubert as if he did not see him, and when he looked at him piercingly with terrified eyes, or turned away as if there were something that he could not bear to see. He was always gentle, even in those strange crises. What was hidden in the life of Alec? Hubert, groping in the realm of mind, felt almost as if he could find and grasp it; but it slipped away, evaded him. Now he almost touched it; then it receded and was gone.

Hubert stood tranced, thinking as he had never thought before, of the people around him, who had been his nearest as far back as he could remember. There is always a time when a young person awakes to the fact that his father and mother are different from what he thought, not merely a father and a mother, but human beings, with their virtues and failings, and their inevitable human history of action and emotion. That time had come to Hubert Faraday. The dead Willard, and the living Averil and Alexander rose before him like new and individualized creatures, seen, in a way, for the first time. It came to him that they had a history which had begun long before he had had perception or even being; to probe that past was more than he could do. He had a vague feeling that their past concerned him more than he understood, and that if he knew more about them, he should know something now undefined about himself.

He woke from his absorption with a dazed sense of the passage of time and the unfolding of knowledge. He saw that the sun was higher, that the mist was gone from the lake, that the hemlocks cast shorter shadows toward the water. He came broad awake then, fumbled at the warped gate, and went into the little plot. While

he worked, he felt upon him the spell of his thinking, the romance of human lives in their complex relationships, realms which hitherto had been densely veiled. He worked while the sun grew warm on his shoulders. He did not whistle as he did when he hoed corn or planted potatoes. Gradually the sombreness of his thoughts lightened. They glanced back to his house, shining white against the hemlocks, to Carraline and the little girl, Flora May, to the long day before him, in which he might do whatever he pleased. He was glad when the yearly task was over, and he could fasten behind him the clinking latch of the graveyard gate.

* * * * *

That evening, when he was out on the lake with Caddie, the mood of the morning returned. He rowed slowly across the red and gold waters, blue beneath them as they looked down. "Funny," said the boy; "I never go over here in the boat that I don't think of my watch that I got when I was twelve years old, down at the bottom of the lake in the mud."

The girl peered down as if she expected to see it, eighty or ninety feet below. "Your father threw it in," she said.

"Yes," answered Bert absently. Then he added, "I wonder why he did that."

"He must have been terribly angry," said Carraline meditatively.

"I know. But what about?" Bert looked over to his companion as if he must have from her the solution of his problems.

"There must have been something," said Caddie. "Can't you remember what went on before that?"

"It's too long ago," said the boy. "I was too little to understand—if there was anything."

"People get awfully mad about nothing," said Caraline wisely.

"I guess they do," Bert agreed; "but I don't believe this was just nothing. There must have been some sort of thing," he persisted, "that set him wild." He was searching the past again, trying to see something obscured by time and ignorance.

"I remember that he acted queer," the girl responded. "I didn't like him very well. I like your stepfather better."

"Yes," said the boy, pulling idly at the oars. "Do you remember, one time, long ago"—he flushed, but went on—"you asked me if I thought mother had made a mistake in marrying him?"

"Marrying who? Alec McLean?"

"No. My father."

"Did I? No, I don't remember." She smiled. "I was always saying pretty awful things. I was so sort of innocent, I didn't know any better." The colour deepened in her cheeks. Perhaps she was reviewing some of the things she had said.

"I remember as plain as day," said Hubert. "We were walking along, over there." He waved the oar toward the road, where it edged the arc of the lake. "It seemed so strange to me. I didn't know then that folks ever made a mistake in getting married."

"But they do," said Caddie quickly.

"Yes. Awful." He thought of Elizabeth Hunt and the missing Benjamin. He suspected that Caddie was thinking of them, too.

"But there was no mistake in your mother's marrying

Mr. McLean," said the girl. "They get along just splendidly, don't they?"

"Yes. But——" Bert hesitated. "I never thought about it until this morning—I don't believe they're so awfully happy—do you?"

Carraline did not look surprised. "No, I don't believe they are," she answered. "But I don't think it's because of *each other*. I mean, I don't think they're unhappy together,—because they don't care for each other."

Bert moved an oar to catch the reddening light of sunset. "N-no," he replied, "it must be something else. I wonder what." His face wore the look of perplexity which it had worn that morning.

Carraline looked puzzled, too. "It can't be anything so very terrible," she said slowly; "for they're both *good*."

"Uh-huh." Bert felt a quick distaste for the word *good* as she had used it. Of course Alec and Averil were "good." He had heard Alec swear at the stupidity of hired men, or the perversity of pigs and cattle; and he had seen his mother cross and fretful when Mrs. Gunder- sen knocked the veneer off her old pieces of mahogany, or when the Danish girl broke her best dishes. But "good,"—oh, of course. If one's mother weren't good, the world would collapse, the universe would go to pieces. One's mother was always good. It was inconceivable that she should be otherwise. Such things merely didn't happen, that was all. In stories, sometimes, or in parts of creation undefined and unvisited, a fellow's mother might be—bad (that is, not good), but occurrences of that kind didn't take place among the people that one knew and loved.

He came back to what Carraline was saying, "I guess if it were anything very shocking, other people would know about it, fast enough."

"That's so," he answered, with only half his thoughts.

"Maybe it's just that they don't like getting old—older, I mean. Of course, they're not really old yet—not like Grampa Gleason. But lots of people feel real bad at getting older."

Bert looked at her in admiration. She knew so much more than he did about people, and had thought about things that hadn't entered his mind. And yet he felt superior to Caddie, too; he had been away at school, and had travelled around quite a little with Alec, and she had stayed right here on the farm. He had a farm of his own. There were a good many ways, if he stopped to think of them, in which he felt superior to Caddie. He would not have liked it if there hadn't been.

"Poor old Grampa, he's getting queerer," Carraline was saying with humourous sadness. "He gets such notions, you know, that we can hardly get him out of them. You know I told you about how he thought the hayfork was going to fall and hurt somebody, and how he got a knife to cut the rope. And, oh, I must tell you about this morning. He got an idea that mother wanted the trees down, so that she could see the road better. She said something about it, one day, I guess, not meaning very much. And this morning, before we were up, Grampa got the axe, and went to cutting the ox-heart cherry-tree down. I heard it, but thought he was just chopping wood, though he doesn't do that on Sundays if he remembers, and finally I got up and looked out the window, and there he was chopping away like mad, and the tree just ready to fall. I called out to him,

but he wouldn't listen, but kept on chopping, and before I could get downstairs the tree fell smash into the lettuce bed!"

Bert marvelled and commiserated. "He's awfully strong yet, isn't he?"

"Yes, sometimes he is," said Caddie. "Then again he's almost as weak as a baby. Of course, he's pretty old now—over eighty."

"It seems funny to be so old," remarked the boy.

Caddie sighed. "I suppose people ought to get something out of life while they're young."

Even Bert, with his boyish obtuseness, realized that she was thinking how little she was getting out of these golden days of youth. He looked at her thoughtfully as she sat in the stern of the boat, in her many-times-washed white dress, and her cheap white canvas shoes. She was nineteen now, but she was slight and girlish. She wore no hat, and her thick brown hair was piled upon her head in curling masses, softening the lines of her thin face, delicately formed and touched with healthy colour in cheeks and lips. He had not thought much about how Carraline looked, accepting her as she was, as he accepted his friends and relatives, regardless of outward appearance.

"You ought to go away somewhere, and have a good time," he said at last.

Caddy cringed. "I can't, of course. There's so much to do, with mother and Grampa Gleason, and Benjy, and Flora May."

"They'd have to get along without you if you died—or got married," he added with a sudden inspiration.

Caddie's face grew pink. "Well, maybe," she con-

ceded. She looked down into the water, where the ripples stirred by the oars took multi-coloured flecks from the sky.

"They'd have to let you go then," he repeated in a triumphant tone. He had just thought of that. A family couldn't hold to a girl for ever, if someone else—a man—wanted her. A man had his rights.

Bert felt exalted at the idea. A man could go right into a family and take a girl out of it, no matter what the other folks thought; if she cared for him, of course. She had to care for him, or she wouldn't go. Suppose the man wanted the girl, and asked her, and she wouldn't go with him! There was that, too. Bert sat astounded. That would be pretty bad. That might be unbearable. But, of course, he reflected, a man would be fairly sure to know whether she liked him, before he asked her. Yes, one would have to be sure of that. There must be ways of knowing. He was so interested in these thoughts that he sat staring at Carraline with unseeing eyes. She looked up sidewise at him uncomfortably.

"See those loons out there," she said, to break the silence. She indicated two black figures on the reddened wave.

But Bert was not to be distracted by loons. "Mm-huh," he answered absently, and went on thinking. Carraline would get married. Someone would go in and take her out of her home. There was Carl Jensen. He's been over there a good deal lately. He conceived an inexplicable dislike of Carl, whom he had heretofore regarded with indifference: a white-headed Dane, a pie-face, a square-head—that's what he was. Imagine Caddie—— He splashed the water wrathfully with his oars. Squeals from Caddie brought him back to his surround-

ings. "Oh, rats!" he exclaimed, "what a dumbster I am!" He was truly chagrined that he had sprinkled his passenger, not because there was any perishable quality in her costume, but chiefly because he was proclaimed a poor oarsman, in defiance of truth.

"It doesn't matter," cried the girl, laughing. "I saw that you were dreaming, and didn't know what you were doing."

"I was just thinking," Bert mumbled. He felt confused, as if he had been caught looking at himself in the glass. "Say, I'll row down to the other end of the lake, if you aren't in any hurry to get home."

"I'd love that," said Caddie, settling back into the seat of the boat. To show that she was at her ease, she began humming a tune which had been sung in church that morning.

* * * * *

When Carraline arrived at home, she found her mother setting out the late Sunday supper. The girl, eager to help, stepped to the bench in the corner, to wash her hands and smooth her hair at the crinkly mirror.

"Mother," she said slowly, pinning up a particularly errant lock, "do you think that Alec and Averil McLean are happy?"

Mrs. Hunt, grown stouter with the years, stood leaning against the built-in cupboard, where she had been reaching for the cups. She held them in her hand while she considered. "Happy?" she said musingly. "Why do you ask that?"

"Oh, because Bert was saying when we were out on the lake that he didn't think they were. He'd just thought about it, he said."

"We-ell," said Mrs. Hunt, turning to put the cups on the table.

"He thought there must be something that bothered them, that we didn't know," explained Caddie.

Mrs. Hunt felt a pang of apprehension. Bert was growing up. He was beginning to wonder. He would be blundering, stirring things up. He might bring on a crisis at any time. She did not answer the girl, but sought fumblingly in the knife box for the proper array of cutlery.

"I told him," Carraline went on, "that it couldn't be anything very terrible, or other people would know it."

"That sounds reasonable," said Libbie, laying knives and forks on the table. There was a wrinkle between her eyes. "Oh, poor souls!" she muttered under her breath.

"What?" asked Caddie curiously.

"Nothing. I seem to have got out knives instead of forks. Well, we can't see into other folks' lives, Caddie," she went on. "I don't know as we have any call to pry, as I guess you've heard me say before."

"Yes, I know," said Carraline. "But I think Alec and Averil ought to be happy. They have all they need to live on, and they like each other. Don't you *think* they do?" she asked anxiously.

"Yes, I think they do," the older woman made solemn reply.

"And they like Bert, and they haven't any trouble _____"

"You don't know," interposed Libbie Hunt, vehemently. "Nobody knows another person's life. *Nobody*."

Carraline looked perplexed. Did her mother have thoughts and troubles that nobody knew? She had a

feeling of awkwardness, as if she might say too much if she went further. There was a space of silence as the two women finished setting the table and getting out the food. After a while, Mrs. Hunt said, "I feel as if we must watch Grampa real careful, these days."

"Oh, I don't believe he'll do anything more for a while," answered Caddie. "He feels so bad about what he's done."

The old man came in just then, very neat in his Sunday garments, which he loved to wear all day. He hung up his hat, and went to put the chairs at the table. He had a subdued and humiliated air. "I didn't mean no harm," he broke out, making his apologies for the twentieth time. He looked at the girl pleadingly. "I wouldn't harm a flea that belonged to you or your mother—not a flea."

Caddie giggled irrepressibly. "Oh, Grampa! What a thing to say!"

"Well, I wouldn't," repeated the old man earnestly.

"I know, Grampa. You're as good as gold." Carraline put her hand on his arm, with her affectionate gesture. "You sit down, now, and start your supper, while I go and get Benjy and Flora May."

* * * * *

Hubert liked the old man, and accepted him in the Hunt family, as if he had been Carraline's real grandfather.

One day in summer, Bert decided to take his supper with him, and walk over to the Chain of Lakes, and tramp about the woods. He made this little pilgrimage once or twice in the season. Sometimes Alec went with him on a Sunday afternoon.

It was a week day, and Alec was busy. Hubert started alone, with his luncheon in a paper packet. Passing the Hunts', he saw Carraline in the yard, and waved to her. She came to the gate for a chat, as she usually did when he was passing. She turned back into the house, and Bert, lingering to adjust a shoe string, heard his name called softly from the path. He looked up. Mr. Gleason was hurrying to the gate, bareheaded, his thin hair blowing in the breeze.

"Boy! Boy!" he called in an undertone. He was breathing quickly, like an excited child. "Don't you want—wouldn't you let me go along? Caddie says you're going over to the Chain." He was shy, tremulous, afraid of being in the way, yet eager for his excursion.

"Why, sure, Grampa." Hubert felt embarrassed by his own stupidity. "I'd have asked you if I'd thought you'd like to go. Of course. Come right along. Shall I get your hat?"

"But about the lunch," the old man faltered.

"I've got enough for both of us," said Bert.

"I can bring some harvest apples." The old man's face brightened.

"All right," said Bert. "That'll be fine."

"I'll get my hat." The old man hastened back to the house. He came out again, smiling proudly, his hat rakishly askew, his pockets bulging. "Libbie made me take some gingerbread and some other things," he said; "and I brought the apples. Have one now?"

"N—yes, sure." Hubert reached for the apple and bit into it with simulated appetite.

They tramped along. The old man walked with a good swing. There was no tottering nor cringing. Bert

was solicitous, but soon ceased to worry about the old man's strength, merely taking care to keep the pace down, and to stop occasionally under pretense of looking at something.

The old man was willing to talk. "I'm an old rat now," he said, glancing sidewise at the boy. "I could walk and work and wrassle with the best of 'em, in my time. It ain't any fun gettin' old, my boy."

Hubert winced. "I suppose not," he answered.

"It's hard," the old man went on. "When you're young, it don't seem as if you was ever goin' to get old. It seems as if you was always goin' to be red-cheeked—as you are now—and brown-headed and straight and able."

Hubert did not know what to say. He felt embarrassed, as if one were talking of a disfigurement. He muttered again, "I suppose that's so."

"I guess there's some things that make up," the old man ventured, after a pause. "There's Caddie, f'r instance. I think she makes up for a lot. She's a fine girl," he continued, seeing that Hubert had no answer to make. "I hope she'll marry someone that'll be good to her, 'n' make her happy." He gave the boy another furtive look. Bert visualized Caddie, poor and hard-worked, being carried off into a more glorified existence. "Carl Jensen, now——" said the old man. He stopped to reach for a wild cherry twig, which he broke and put into his mouth.

Bert felt a change of emotion running through him. Carl Jensen! Why should he be mentioned in the same breath with Caddie? "Huh?" he grunted, half in scorn and half in curiosity.

"Carl Jensen hangs around her a good deal," said

Mr. Gleason. "I hope"—he balanced his words—"I hope he ain't countin' on gettin' her."

"He won't get her," snorted Bert.

The old man chewed his wild cherry twig reflectively. "Hm. I hope not," he said. "But——"

"What'd she want of a tow-headed Dane?" asked Bert angrily.

"Well, the girls around here have taken 'em." Mr. Gleason shook his head as if in warning. "There was Susie Whitmore—she married Berndt Olsen; and Mary Harkness——"

Bert did not wait for the complete list. "I guess Caddie knows better than that," he replied, with a savour of sullenness. "She ain't like either of those girls."

"I don't know," said the old man. "A girl gets tired of being tied up at home. When she gets desp'rit enough, she's willin' to jump out o' the fryin' pan, even if it is into the fire. I was hopin'," he added tentatively, getting rid of the wild cherry twig with an explosive breath, "Mm-m——"

"What?" Bert carefully refrained from seeming too much interested.

"Well, that Caddie'd get a real nice American fellow—a clean straight sort of chap, with a good family behind him, an' nothin' to be ashamed of."

"Prob'ly she will, all right," murmured Bert. Of course Carraline would get that sort of a fellow. Just who he'd be—that was hard to say. There weren't very many fellows of that kind around the country. But probably there would be one, when the right time came. Bert hunched himself along with his hands in his pockets. He did not feel quite the exhilaration that he had felt when Carraline had left him at the gate.

Without much more talk, the two made their way past the log house, and down the grass-grown road to the largest lake of the Chain. The old man was glad to sit down on a fallen tree and rest. They had come more slowly than Bert had intended, and it was time for them to eat their outdoor meal. They ate with a relish, pressing the food upon each other, each watching lest he should seem indifferent or greedy.

"I've heard tell," the old man said, holding his piece of gingerbread in his hand, "that these lakes are on a different level from the one your farm is on."

It thrilled Bert to hear him say *your farm*. His farm was becoming more and more precious in his eyes. "Yes, I know it is," he answered. "Alec told me that, a long time ago. It's a matter of five or six feet, I guess, and only a little way through."

"I heard about it years ago. I disremember who told me. I know just about where the place is." Mr. Gleason indicated a direction with the piece of gingerbread. "'Sposing we go over an' look, after we've got done eating."

"All right," said Bert. He liked humouring the old man. There was still a good deal of daylight left. They might as well go to one place as another. When they had finished, and had tempted various wild creatures in fur and feathers with the fragments of the feast, they rose and walked along the edge of the lake, through blueberry bushes and overhanging boughs. Sometimes the ground was slippery with pine needles, and the walking became difficult. "I don't believe we'd better go on," remonstrated Bert, anxious lest he should be doing an injury to the old man.

"It ain't hurtin' me a mite," Mr. Gleason assured him.

So they kept on, until they came to the narrow neck of land between the two lakes—a deceptively sloping little isthmus which innocently concealed its sinister possibilities under a grassy smoothness set with pearly clumps of birch. “Here ’tis,” cried Mr. Gleason excitedly. “See! It’s just a teeny little ways through, and the grade is so kind of queer that you wouldn’t think there was a lot of difference. Curious, ain’t it?” He pointed with a shaky forefinger to the various peculiarities of the topography.

“Yes, it is.” Bert was interested, in a way; but under everything he was thinking of Carraline, and what Grampa Gleason had said about Carl Jensen, and about the American girls in the community who had married Danes. After all, a little neck of land between two lakes did not seem of terrible importance.

The old man was pacing the distance, and trying the grade. “The water’s low now,” he was saying; “but if it should get real high, it wouldn’t be much of a job to cut right through, and throw the lakes all together.”

Bert started. “Why should anyone want to do that?” he asked sharply.

The old man looked dazed. “Oh, I don’t know,” he said, blinking. “I—was just thinking how ’twould be. No, no, I don’t s’pose anyone’d reely want it done.”

“I should say not,” cried the boy. “It would play the deuce with my land, you know.”

“Would it?” returned the old man, still confused. “Yes, yes, I dare say it would. It might run all over everything.”

“You bet it would,” said Bert. He did not believe that the old man actually understood, but he hardly thought it worth while to explain. He felt vexed with

himself for coming over here, and letting Mr. Gleason in for a long tramp home. Besides, he was absorbed in his own thoughts. He couldn't help thinking of what the old man had said about Carraline, and her jumping from the frying pan into the fire. "Come on; let's be starting back," he said. The old man came docilely enough, though he muttered from time to time as they walked along, "It reely ain't very far through there. Anybody could cut it through that wanted to."

* * * * *

All the time, during the next days, Hubert was thinking of Carraline. Somehow, clear or faint, she was in his mind. He thought of her as he went about his work in the fields, when he rode back and forth between his house and Alec McLean's, when he slept in his own bed in the house beside the lake, or in his own bed under his mother's roof. When he ate or dawdled about his place or sat idle, there was always the picture of Carraline before him, always her warmth and sweetness permeating his spirit. Sometimes in these dreams he felt a pulsing thrill that ran through him, a swimming, breathless emotion, as if he were in an ecstatic trance.

Outwardly he gave no sign. But he went often to Carraline's home; and he took occasion to treat Carl Jensen with overwhelming disdain. He whirled past him in the Ford without stopping for a nod, and when compelled to face him, he spoke with a haughty air which puzzled the young Dane more than it distressed him. At noon or in the evening, Hubert would sit on his front porch, overlooking the lake, and survey his friendship with Carraline, as it had existed since their childhood. They had been together constantly, and had regarded each

other almost as brother and sister. But he had never really seen her since she had grown up. He had perversely retained the image of her as she had been in earlier years. He now considered what she had been through, the long bitter labours with renunciations, when she had hungered for opportunities which she could not have, and repressed her desires, her hopes, her youth. He felt indignant at what she must have suffered, and he told himself vaguely that someone ought to do something for her, ought to make some effort to give her what she had missed.

One day he burst out, when he was with her, "You've had a pretty mean time, I'll say."

"I can't quite say that," she answered. "But I always wanted to get away, to go to school, and to see what's in the world. I never could, and I can't now, but I don't know as it makes any difference."

Bert felt a throb of compunction. "I could have gone on, if I'd wanted to," he said. "But I thought I'd rather farm it, and be back here in the place with my folks." He had known that Alec had had some notion of providing schooling for Carraline, but had given it up because there never seemed to be a time when she could get away.

"Well, your life is your life, and mine is mine," she responded. Carraline seemed incapable of envying another person's good fortune. "I had my place to fill. I guess it couldn't have turned out any other way."

"If your father——" began Bert acridly. "He ought to have done something for you."

"He didn't understand," said Caddie. "He never knew how much I wanted things."

"He never cared," said Bert, still with bitterness.

"No. Well, that was because he didn't understand. He never seemed like a father," the girl went on. "I mean, later, when I was old enough to think—that last summer that he was home—I used to look at him and think, why he was just a stranger that had got into the house."

"Yes." Bert voiced an inner protest. "But folks are folks—your own, I mean."

"I never thought they were unless you cared for them," said Caddie calmly.

"I've heard you say something like that," the boy replied. "But I'm afraid I don't get you—except that two people that aren't related sometimes like each other—awfully." He grew self-conscious over this slight reference to the love of man and woman.

His thought grew more and more suffused with this knowledge—of two people who might like each other awfully. But he was willing to wait, to think, to brood. They were both young yet. There was plenty of time.

It was two years more before his thinking took shape in speech.

CHAPTER V

THE two years were busy ones, with work on the farms, and winter courses at the Agricultural School in the State University. There had been some talk of Hubert's going to war, but the Armistice was signed, and the war was over before he could be called.

Then came exaltation and catastrophe.

It was the summer in which Bert was twenty. Events began with the red currants. Alec McLean was away, buying machinery and looking up a new stabling arrangement. Hubert was staying with his mother while Alec was gone. One evening, after the early supper, he took the Ford and started out aimlessly for a ride. He went past the log house, towards the Chain of Lakes, and then decided to turn back. After he had turned, he glanced over his shoulder, and to his surprise saw old Mr. Gleason crossing the road, at some distance away. Though he had only a glance, he noted that the old man looked weary and walked ploddingly. He called to Mr. Gleason, intending to ask him to ride; but the old man either did not hear or pretended not to, and slipped into the bushes, disappearing in the direction of a short cut through the fields, toward Libbie Hunt's. Bert called again, but had no answer.

Making the mental comment, "Grampa certainly is getting queer," Bert went on into the main road. With loud honking, he stopped his car in front of the Hunt

house. Presently Carraline came around the corner of the house. "Hello, there!" called Bert.

"Hello!" answered Caddie. She was wearing a fresh and attractive black-and-white gingham gown. Smiling at Bert across the fence, she pushed back her damp hair from her forehead with red-stained fingers, then spread out her hands to look at them. "I've been picking currants," she said. "But we haven't many this year."

"Your mother said you hadn't," Bert replied. "I've got stacks over at my place. We don't use an awful lot. We like other kinds of jelly better." He knew that Mrs. Hunt sold all the jelly that she could spare. "Get in, and I'll take you over to the house, and we'll pick some."

Carraline hesitated. "There's plenty to do here," she said.

"Oh, come on," urged Bert. "You can pick the rest of yours any time. Get some pails, and we'll fill 'em up."

Carraline went to get the pails, and Bert hopped out, to help her into the car. They were soon bumping up the lane to his house. The currant bushes, between the house and the barn, were loaded with heavy red clusters. "Nine-tenths of 'em would have gone to waste," Hubert explained. For half an hour they worked and talked, stopping now and then to eat a particularly luscious handful. "Oh, say," cried Bert, suddenly bethinking himself, "I saw Grampa Gleason, off in the woods toward the Chain." He frowned over the tartness of the cluster which he had just put into his mouth.

"Oh, did you?" answered Carraline quickly. "We've been wondering where he's been, these days. Sometimes he's been gone all the afternoon. He'd start off without saying anything, and stay for a long time, and then

when he came home he'd be all tired out. We don't like to fuss with him about what he does, for it hurts his feelings, and he thinks we're bothered because he doesn't spend all his time working. So we just sort of let him go as he likes."

Bert continued to frown, as he looked at Caddie with troubled grey eyes across the currant bushes. "I don't know," he said, "whether that's right or not. I should think he ought to be looked after. But of course you can't keep your eye on him every minute; and I don't know what damage he could do."

"No, I don't, either," said Carraline, looking worried. "He means so well, though he does get all mixed up, sometimes."

"Oh, well, when a man's as old as he is, he ought to do about as he pleases," commented Bert. "It's kind of as if he was a little boy again."

"Yes, that's it," agreed Caddie absently, stripping a branch. "These certainly are lovely currants."

"Aw, never mind the currants," answered Bert recklessly. "Come on. It's a fine evening. Let's walk down to the Point."

"Oh, dear! that's like running away from school," laughed the girl. "I *am* tired of working."

"Then come." Bert came around the row of bushes, and took the pail out of his companion's hand. They walked up to the house, and rinsed their fingers at the pump. Then they strolled out through the yard, and along the bank of the lake, beyond the hemlock grove. The sun was still above the horizon, casting long red rays through the bushes and among the boles of trees. There was no talk between the young people. As they passed the fenced plot of the cemetery, Bert, conscious

of the proximity of the graves, put out his arm and drew the girl to him protectingly. Neither of them said a word. They walked on a few steps farther; then he gently drew her closer, and leaned and kissed her. It seemed as natural a thing to do as breathing. He felt surprise that he was not more astonished or elated, that Carraline was not reluctant or tearful. It all seemed easy and simple, as if there had never been need for anything else.

They went on silently to the Point. Here listless waves lapped against a little beach. Through an opening in the bass-wood branches and the boughs of Juneberry and birch, they could look across to the end of the lake, a quarter of a mile away, softly outlined by a tamarack swamp. As they stood there beside the water, the ecstasy which they at first had missed came over them simultaneously.

Hubert put his hands on the girl's shoulders, looking into her eyes with grave tenderness. "Oh, Carraline, do you know what it *means*?" he cried.

She bowed her head against his shoulder. "That we love each other," she whispered, though there was no creature larger than a kingfisher to hear.

"And always have," he added in a whisper.

"And are always going to," she murmured.

"Everything is changed," he said, catching the wonder of it all. "There will never be a time when we don't."

"Not ever," she acquiesced.

"We'll always be together," the boy made prophecy. "No matter what happens, nothing can make us give each other up." He was carried away by the solemnity, the marvel of his words. "Nothing can make any difference, keep us from loving, keep us from belonging."

"That's why we've lived here close together—why our fathers and mothers came here."

"That's why we were born."

It was the old antiphony of love.

"It's—it's wonderful," breathed Caddie.

"Did you know—did you know I cared?" asked Hubert in her ear.

"I didn't dare think about it," she answered.

"And you cared, too, all the time?"

"Yes, I suppose so—I don't know."

"We don't know just when it began," admitted Hubert.

"No. It just seems as if it was always this way."

"And always would be." This is the chorus of young love, *Nothing can ever change*.

There was a rough bench beside the beach, which Bert had put there for use in bathing. They sat down now, close to each other, talking in low tones of their sudden miracle. Again Bert marvelled at his state of manliness, at his feat of talking love to a woman, of kissing her, holding her in his arms. He felt the pride of achievement, which was his largess of the hour.

The question of ways and means hardly counted with them in the bewilderment of first avowals. "We'll have to wait a little," said Bert at last. "They'll say we're pretty young."

"We are; or *you* are," smiled Caddie, stroking his hand.

He accepted her greater maturity without rancour.

"But nobody can say what we should do," he asserted stoutly, stern in his new-found independence.

"There's mother to think of," said Caddie. "I don't know——"

"Well, Benjy and Flora May are older now," he con-

soled her. "They don't need you so much as they did. There must be some way to fix it up." Everything seemed easy in this time and place.

The sun had gone down, and dusk had begun to fall. The lovers rose, with the instinctive feeling that lyric joy will lose its perfection if prolonged. They rode home, entranced, saying little. "Let's not tell anyone to-night," said Bert, fearing an alien touch upon his happiness. "Let's wait till to-morrow, anyhow."

"I'd just as lief," said the girl, "though it seems as if I have to tell mother."

"You can tell her in a day or two," Bert said.

"Oh," cried Carraline, remembering, "I'm going to Prattsville to-morrow, with the Hendrickses, to be gone all day. They're going to take me in their car."

"Rats!" cried Hubert. "Then I can't see you."

"Well, I didn't know this was going to happen," answered Carraline, with a laugh.

"You might have known," the boy responded. What had happened seemed now inevitable. They had stopped at the gate. "It'll be great, thinking about it," he said as he helped her out of the car. "And there's time to see each other. There'll be years and years just the same." As they stood there, they had a vision of the three farms, and their little group of people, with lives and affections going on and on, unchanged and unblighted, and their own love the golden centre of this enduring contentment.

* * * * *

Bert spun home in a state of exaltation. When he had put away the car, he walked back and forth, under the trees in the gathering dusk. He was intent upon

the wonder of what had happened to him, on his startled and yet natural acceptance of what was his, to have and to hold.

When he was a little chap, he had had a hard time; he had suffered, and Carraline had been his comfort. He turned back to that dreadful time before his father's death. He had scarcely dared to let himself remember it, because it seemed so full of hurt and terror. Now it was softened, atoned for. It didn't matter. Life was going to make up for everything. Life was good, beautiful, beneficent. He lifted his arms and stretched them out, reaching impatiently toward the future, wishing for time to pass, that what was to come might be unfolded.

He went into the house. The greater part of it was dark, and cool winds were blowing the white curtains in the gloom. Averil McLean was in the sitting-room, reading beside the lamp. The warm light showed her a trifle stouter than she had been when she married Alec, and more settled looking, but handsomer, in the fashion of maturity. On the hand that held the magazine to the glow of the lamp, Alexander's engagement ring sparkled below a plainer band.

She looked up, when Hubert came into the room. "Have you been over to the other house, Bertie?" she asked.

"Yes, I took Carraline over, to pick some currants," he answered.

She smiled. "That's good. We can't use them all."

There was a singing all through his body, a chanting in his heart. He felt a dim gratitude toward his mother for bringing him into the world—the world where he had found Carraline and love. He went and stood

beside her. She put up her hand and took his. There was a rush of emotion between them. It had seemed as if she had never dared to express the fullness of her love for him. Some remembrance or some fear had restrained her. But now the completeness of their understanding stood for a moment at the zenith. She yearned upward toward him. He leaned and kissed her, held her hand blindly for a minute, and then stumbled from the room. If he stayed longer, he would tell, and he wanted to keep his secret through the night, and perhaps another day.

* * * * *

The next day he was absorbed within himself, withdrawn from the outer world, thinking—or not exactly thinking, but dreaming, feeling. He walked on mountaintops. But withal he had begun to wonder how the older people about him were going to accept the news. He realized that he and Carraline would be regarded as young to make so serious a choice. But they *knew*, he told himself. They knew what they wanted, as well as if they were a hundred. Nothing could change them, no matter how long they waited, nor what might happen.

He was aching to tell, stinging with curiosity as to what Alexander and Averil would say, glorying in his unexpected growing-up, in his decision and independence, self-satisfied with what he had done and what he was going to do. He was young, of course, but he wasn't a baby. He had a settled place in life. He had a house and a farm of his own; he had a start even now that some young fellows had to work a long time to get. Why, he might have had to go on for years, renting a farm

or working one on the shares, trying to save money, so that he could have a place of his own. He was conscious of a surprised stirring of gratitude toward his father. Never before had he felt so kindly toward Willard Faraday. It was that hard demoniac labour of his which had paid for the farm, as well as his care with fertilizers and the rotation of crops, his thrift and economy and honesty. Of course it had improved under Alec's supervision, and his own (Hubert's) hard work. It was making more money than it did in the earlier days. It was richer, more productive, worth more.

But after all, it was an heritage from his father, such as every young man should have at the beginning, not only as a substantial help in life, but as a sign of family solidarity, the passing on of values from father to son. Hubert could not phrase all this, but he saw the farm as something which he had gained by virtue of being his father's son. It did not matter so much what that father had been like. The boy had never thought so deeply about *family* before. The idea came to him now with real solemnity. He was at once softened and enlightened. He spied upon the future. His own son should find something waiting for him, the fruit of his father's prevision and toil. It was an exciting thought. Of course he would have a son; and his son should find nothing to be ashamed of in his father. Hubert dwelt sorrowfully upon the dead Willard. If Willard had only known how much it would have meant to his son to remember a father free from spot and blemish, perhaps he would have acted differently, would have left memories less repellant and less bitter. "Poor father!" Hubert found himself saying. He had understood so little, achieved so little happiness, won only a useless

and tragic passing-out. It was almost unbearable to think of. Hubert felt compassion for his father mingled with his joy.

The day was Saturday. In the afternoon, Hubert decided, after finishing a piece of work in the garden, to put on his bathing suit, and run over to the lake, in the Ford, and have a swim before dressing himself freshly for the Saturday night supper, which indicated a comparative cessation of the labours of the week. Arriving at his house, he left the car and walked down to the Point where he and Carraline had sat the day before. He was surprised to see how high the water was, and he recollected that yesterday he had been vaguely aware of the shrunken size of the little beach, though he had been too much absorbed to give it any notice. To-day he gave the matter more definite thought, recalling a number of heavy storms which had occurred during the last weeks. He made up his mind that the rain had been heavier than he had realized, raising the water to an unwonted height.

After his swim, he sat for a few minutes on the bench, thinking about himself and Caddie. He felt a growing desire to let his mother know the great thing which had taken place. He must tell her. It would be another day or two before Alec would come back. Hubert and Averil would have the secret together, and then when the time came, Alec could be told. Alec would be glad, without a doubt. He liked Carraline; and the prospective marriage, even though suitably delayed, would mean that Hubert would settle down and stay in the old place, and things would go on without changing.

Yes, the boy resolved, he would tell his mother, and

they would telephone later to see whether Caddie had come home. If she had, he would go after her, and they would all have a little time of rejoicing together. Bert started up, half running through the grass. He could hardly wait now, to reveal his tremendous news. He ran lightly, happily, like a young animal exulting in the well-being of strength and summer.

He made the car whir over the newly finished State road, which the advent of the automobile among the farmers had made imperative. He ran in at the back door of the house, across the newly scrubbed floor of the kitchen, and up the back stairs.

His bare feet made no sound along the boards. He was not whistling, but dumb, intent on the wonder of what he had to say. In his room, he flung off the half-dry bathing suit, and got himself into shirt and trousers and stockings. He paused, engrossed, triumphant. Oh, he need not wait. Without putting on his shoes or smoothing his hair, he turned to go into his mother's room. He had heard a sound, a footfall, a murmur or sigh, which had told him that she was there. Soundlessly he moved along the strip of carpet in the hall. The door of his mother's room stood open.

Averil was sitting before the old-fashioned chest of drawers, with the mahogany-framed mirror above it. One drawer was pulled out, and she had apparently taken something from it, which she held in her hand. Her head bent, she was looking down at it with fixed intentness. So oblivious was she that she did not hear the slight sound which the approach of Hubert may have made. He remembered that she had been sitting like that, years ago, when he burst in upon her with the news of his father's death.

He stepped up behind her, and looked over her shoulder. The thing which she was holding was a picture in a square leather case. He was not surprised to see that the picture showed the likeness of Alexander McLean—a younger Alec, not more than twenty-four, or even twenty-three; with thick, untidy hair and a low collar; a boyish picture which represented him as he had been when he had first come to that neighbourhood from New York State. Hubert wondered why he had never seen the picture before.

Aware now of the presence behind her, Averil started, clutching at the leather case in her hand. At the same moment, Hubert raised his eyes and saw his own reflection in the glass. Was it his own? It was the exact duplicate of the face in the picture which his mother held. His eyes travelled down and up again, to the amazing vision in the mirror—the fresh young face, the thick, untidy hair, the strong, well-poised throat. The face was the image of that below.

Hubert stood still, hardly breathing. It was as if a door had opened in his consciousness, and he saw what he had never seen before, and yet had always known. The world rocked. Averil, staring up at him, saw his face go white, his hands reached gropingly for the back of her chair and the edge of the dresser. She rose, pushing away the chair, which fell with an unheeded clatter. She was terrified, shrinking. She knew, before his lips moved, what he was going to say. His hand went unsteadily toward the mirror, and then toward the picture which she still held in her fingers. "Mother!" he whispered, "the pictures—there—and there——"

"What of them?" she asked, to gain time, to make some pretense, to hold off what was coming.

He paid no heed to her parrying. "Mother—is *Alec my father?*"

She cringed away from him, her back to the wall. Her face was as white as his. The fear and shame of a lifetime were in her eyes.

"Mother—is he—is he——" The boy could not repeat what he had said.

Still she did not speak, hoping fatuously to escape the anguish of admission.

He came toward her, blazing-eyed and threatening, his hands clenched. "Answer me," he commanded hoarsely. "Is it true?"

She put her hand before her eyes. "Yes. Yes." Her murmur hardly reached him. Guilt and horror were but half concealed.

Hubert shrank back from her, closing his eyes, reaching again for the steadying solidity of the chest of drawers. *Now he knew.* A minute before he had been ignorant of the mystery which lay behind his life; now it was as if it had never been unknown to him. Of course. Stupid, blind idiot that he had been! Of course Alec McLean was his father!

He turned and went through the hall, down the front stairs, out of the house. He was unmindful of the fact that he wore no shoes, that he was only half dressed. He strode out as in a daze, not knowing where he went, except that he was seeking something dear and familiar. The universe fell in fragments, the worlds receded, chaos reigned.

As he went along the road he saw nothing, heard nothing. One sentence kept repeating itself, "Now I know." That which had ever baffled him was clear.

With ineffable contempt, he cursed his doltish wit. Why hadn't he seen it all before? Had he never looked into Alec's face? Had he never seen his own image in the glass? He walked dishevelled, staring, as if he went in darkness. He heard a voice which he did not recognize as his own, panting out oaths, "By God! By God!"

He never knew whether he met anyone on the road or not. He did not remember passing the house in which Carraline lived. After a while he found that he was opening the gate and walking up the lane to his own house. He saw the warm afternoon sun shining upon it, the fresh white paint, the green shutters, the neatness and serenity of it, with the dark hemlocks beyond, shutting it into its own circle. Presently he was on the steps of the house, overlooking the lake. He sat there a long time; he did not know how long. He was not thinking; for thinking was an impossible mental effort. His mind was boiling, seething, with a consciousness of something new and yet old and horrible and appalling. There was nothing coherent, nothing defined. All was without form and void. Then one thing stood up again, like a peak of pain. Alexander McLean was his father; his mother was an abandoned woman, a shameless hypocrite; and the world had gone to pieces.

He rose and walked, walked up and down, to the gate and back, out to the barn, down to the shore, where the water lapped high, along the path to Willard's grave. He felt the stones and harsh roots and stubs against his feet. He went back to the house, found shoes and put them on, and then wandered from room to room. He heard his telephone ringing, but did not answer. He

had nothing to say to any one, and an instinct of caution warned him to make no revelations over the wire.

* * * * *

Some time afterward he was on the porch again. The long, summer twilight was beginning. He saw his mother coming. She was hurrying up the lane, in her pretty afternoon dress and an old hat which she wore in the garden. She had walked all the way; her shoes were covered with dust. He knew that she did not like walking.

He sat watching her in a detached way, until she was near. Then he stood up stiffly, trying to keep his face expressionless. As she came on, relief was depicted in her face, overshadowed by her deadly suffering. "Oh, you're all right," she gasped.

"All right?" He spoke with amazement and irony. Could he ever be all right again?

"I didn't know where you were," she stammered. "I waited for you to come back, and I hunted all around our place, and tried to telephone to you. I was afraid you might—do something——"

"Mother—would it be strange?" he said.

"Oh, Bert!"

"With such a mother."

She held out her hands. "But, my dearest, you do love me—you have loved me!"

"Yes." He looked at and beyond her. "When I didn't know—what you were."

"I'm not bad," she cried sharply. "You know I'm not—not——"

"What is bad?" he queried. "What does a man expect his mother to be?"

"Oh, but, Bertie," she cried, "if you knew, if you knew what I've suffered!" She was wringing her hands.

"You ought to suffer," he made response. "And how about my f—about Willard Faraday? Didn't he suffer? I can see it all now—what he went through. And I was pitying you—everybody was pitying you." He stopped. "Who knows about this?"

"No one, Bert," she told him, her voice beseeching credence. "Not a soul, unless someone has guessed." She thought of Libbie Hunt. Probably she understood. "I've never heard a whisper. Don't think about that."

"How can I help thinking about that?" With bitter mockery he went on, "How do I know who sneers at me behind my back?" He seemed to see a whole cloud of neighbours, mowing and gibbering, pointing and snickering.

"Oh, Bertie, it isn't true," she protested. "It isn't. Nobody *knows*."

"Well, I know now," he answered. His shoulders drooped. His hands hung at his sides. "I know what my mother is—a hypocrite—a liar—a—a——" His lips were untrained in the words that he should use. He stuttered, his mouth twitching. His mind was probing her past. "Why, you must have been—all those years—Pah!" He shuddered. "Go home. Go away. I don't want to look at you."

"But, Bertie"—she stood her ground, though she was shaking—"it was a long time ago. Can't you forgive me?"

"A long time ago—more than twenty years," he said. He threw out his arms passionately. "But *I'm* here—who's to blame for that? *I'm here*. And I've got to go on being me, and knowing—knowing——" His voice

broke. "And I was going to tell you about Carraline and me—we were—we——" He turned, leaning his arm against the post of the porch, and his head on his arm. He was groaning and shivering.

In the midst of her torment, his words were a relief—*I've got to go on being me*. Then he would not do anything terrible, would not——

He was speaking again, "What is there left for me?"

"Why, Bert, there's a lot. There's your place—and Carraline." Her heart leaped. Here was a hold upon him. "There's Carraline. And Alec and me—we love you. It's all just the same, Bert; only——"

He turned on her savagely. "*Only—yes, only*. It can't ever be the same. You and Alec! My mother and my father! I hate you both. Go away. Go away. I don't want you here. I don't want to see you. Go away, before I throw you in the lake." He had raised his voice, in the wild clamour of youth outraged. She shrank. "By God, I will! I'll throw you in. I'll give you what you deserve!"

She stepped back from his clutches, but did not flee. The paroxysm passed. He saw how foolish he was, how crazily he was acting. He put out his hand. "No, no. You needn't be afraid. I won't do it. But oh, mother, mother, could you blame me if I did?"

She stood trembling, longing to take him in her arms, to comfort him for that for which there was no comfort, to shield him from the consequences of too much knowing. "Perhaps not," she said reluctantly. "But, oh, my dearest, I love you just the same."

He sank down dully, covering his face again. "Go home. I've got to think it out."

"Can't I stay?" she asked timidly. "I'll go into the

house. I'll keep quiet. I'll get you something to eat." She felt a throbbing desire to minister to him.

"No, no! I can't have you here. Go on. Go home. It's getting late." He was aware of the caroling of whippoorwills, the flight of bats, the onrush of dew and darkness. The house withdrew into the shadows of the hemlocks. The boy took his mother by the arm not ungently, and urged her toward the lane which led to the highway. With one backward pleading glance she was gone, her head down, her step precarious. She had gone home. He followed her with his mind, as she had so often followed his father on the same road.

* * * * *

Bert stayed there on the porch while the moon rose behind the hemlocks, and began sprinkling its silver flakes along the water. The house and the nearer shore were in the shadow, for the house faced the west. The higher the moon climbed, the wider its reflection grew upon the lake. It was such a night as the farmer loves, even though he be less than poet. The whole summer world seemed quickening and pulsing in the procreative dusk.

The thoughts of the boy were chiefly of Carraline. What could he be to her now? He felt himself polluted. It was as if he had some foul disease in his flesh. He could never marry, to disgrace a wife with his sinful origin, never have children, to besmirch them with the taint on his own birth. He could never be anything but a living image of shame. There was no palliation for his passing on such an image to another generation. He could never marry Carraline without telling her. He figured the shock and horror which the girl would

feel in hearing his hideous tale. She would, and rightly, refuse to have anything to do with any of them again.

Here was the end of everything that had seemed so unending, so perfect and intact. It was laughable to see how soon all that he had thought so indestructible had been destroyed. He laughed, scaring some little creature in the bushes, so that it padded off through the leaves in sudden panic. Bert rose and walked about in the wet grass. Again he approached the enclosed graveyard beside the lake. He remembered wondering, long ago, whether his father knew that he was buying graves when he bought this farm.

He looked back at the circumstances of his father's death. The question leaped upon him: Did Alec McLean kill Willard Faraday? An uncontrollable shuddering seized the boy. He held to the picket fence for support. The heinousness of the second crime redoubled that of the first. Perhaps Willard had found out, and Alec had killed him to keep him still. Perhaps the two men had quarreled, and had fought each other in the winter woods. Hubert peered into the past, trying to remember what had happened on that tragic day eight years before. What had been said and done? He recalled the fact that as he came upon the scene in the forest, he had heard his own name spoken. What took place during the minute afterward he could not know.

He strove to remember the incidents that followed. Had there been an inquest? He thought not. He seemed to remember that old Dr. Frame had signed a paper that made everything all right. How had other people felt about the matter? Had they suspected Alec, without daring to voice their suspicions? He had been

too blind in those days to dream of such a thing, and now even the existence of Willard and his taking off seemed to have vanished from men's minds.

Regaining his strength, Hubert moved away from the fenced plot and walked back and forth, tramping through the dewy bushes, not heeding where he went. He dwelt in thought on Alec—Alec whom he had loved so much, who seemed kind and gentle, like a perfect father. Was he, could he be a libertine and a murderer? And did people know the relationship between father and son? Surely they had looked with wisdom on his face and on Alec's; surely they had seen what he had seen in the mirror! Of a truth, not everybody could be blind. And yet almost everybody took a man's father for granted. It had never occurred to him to question the paternity of his friends. The world suddenly became a place full of infamous secrets, of hidden dishonours, of skulking shames.

Then, as ever, his thoughts came back to Carraline. If he could only purify himself for her, with sacrifices, tear his pollution from his flesh, restore himself by some prodigious effort to the status of a free-born man! He groaned, rending at his breast in his agony of spirit.

The hours had gone on. The east paled, and birds cheeped in the thickets. At last the boy made his way heavily back to his house and went in. Fumbling on the shelf, he found matches and a lamp. Fierce youthful hunger had asserted itself. There was always food in cans and boxes on the pantry shelves. He ate something, he scarcely knew what. Leaving the lighted lamp on the table, he went up to his room, and threw himself down in a deep sleep. When he awoke, it was late in the forenoon. His sorrows rushed in upon him, like a

flood. He dragged himself downstairs to the kitchen, and made a wretched attempt at eating and drinking. Brooding, he went out at the back door, to attend to the work at the barn. Then he went out to his fields, and toiled furiously at pulling weeds out of the corn. He had forgotten that it was Sunday. As he went, he heard his telephone ringing, but he did not answer. He had nothing to say.

An hour later, he was aware that clouds were darkening the sky. Later yet, he saw Libbie Hunt, in her grey calico gown, coming down the rows. Her normally ruddy face was wan and anxious. He stood leaning on his hoe awaiting her approach, with a sullen look of self-defense.

"Your mother asked me to come and talk to you," Mrs. Hunt explained as she drew near.

"She needn't," he said sulkily.

"It's funny," remarked Libbie with irrelevance; "the lake looks awful queer and hateful. I declare, I never saw the water so high. What makes it, do you think?"

"Why, I don't know," he answered, hardly hearing what she said. The height of the water seemed of small consequence.

"Your mother telephoned me, and asked me to come and see you," repeated Mrs. Hunt.

"I don't see why." A deep, red flush overspread the face of the boy. Choking, he turned away to hide his shame. "I suppose—you know," he said.

"She didn't say anything, except to go and see you. She wouldn't, over the 'phone, you know," replied Mrs. Hunt.

"Then you guessed—or you always knew," returned Hubert.

"No," she made answer slowly. "I don't know any-

"No. I haven't said a word to her. I slipped out thing but that you're in trouble."

"Does Caddie know?" he asked abruptly. without telling her where I was going."

"Of course she'll hate me now," he burst out passionately. He was growing white under his tan.

Libbie came a step closer to him. She reached out a hand to touch him, but he shrank away. "Dear Bert," she said, with tenderness in her voice, "she won't hate you. She couldn't do that. And why should we let her know?"

He stared at her in angry stupefaction. "Not let her know," he cried, "and go on and keep her fooled, and marry her after a while! Do you think I could be such a skunk as that? No, that's not me."

"You take this too hard, Bert." There were tears in Libbie's eyes, tears of pain for the suffering which she saw. "It ain't anything that affects *you*—it ain't, really, Bert. If you'd only listen——"

He flung himself away from her, and tramped up and down the rows, waving her off with agitated hands. "Don't try to tell me that sort of stuff," he cried. "I'm not a baby. I guess I can see."

"Oh, Bert, dear, do listen," Elizabeth pleaded.

"No."

"It ain't your fault," the woman went on, "and why should you suffer? It can't touch *you*, the *real you*. Can't you see that, Bertie?"

"No, I can't see any such nonsense." In his heart he had put away her words to think about, but he would not let her know. "Don't try to argue with me," he said wearily. "There isn't anything to be said."

Libbie sighed, drooping. "Don't take it so hard," she said again.

"I have to take it hard," he responded, wondering how anyone could take it in any other way.

"What good does it do?" she queried. "Everybody has to go on living, same as ever."

"Have they?" he retorted.

"Of course they have."

"I'm not so sure."

"Of course they do. Of course they must," she answered breathlessly.

"We'll see," he said grimly. Then he tried to force an ordinary tone. "Now, Mrs. Hunt, you'd better go home. It's going to rain and rain mighty hard, I'm pretty sure."

Libbie scanned the sky anxiously. "I believe it is," she conceded. "I hate to go and leave you like this."

"You needn't," he replied. "And you can tell Caddie all you know. I wish you would," he called, as she moved away.

"Well, I guess I will," she called back. "It might be the best thing." The wind was rustling the young corn, turning the long blades inside out; and clouds were growing blacker.

Bert called to her again. "I'm sorry I haven't the car, to take you home. I—I walked over when I came."

"It's all right," she answered. "And I suppose you've forgot that it's Sunday, haven't you? Folks don't go pulling weeds on Sunday."

"Oh, is it?" said Bert. The day of the week seemed as unimportant as the height of the water. But when Libbie was out of sight, he went slowly up to the house. The church bells at the village had begun

to ring. He was relieved to know that Libbie Hunt must have reached home before the rain began. When it came, it fell with a steady beating thud, which offered no abatement as the day wore on.

* * * * *

Alexander McLean arrived home in the dusk of that rain-swept day. Not finding his wife below stairs, he went up at once to her room. He found her lying on the bed, with her face hidden, her attitude one of despairing grief.

His voice rang with a quick terror. "Averil! What is it?" He bent over her, putting a hand to her shoulder.

She raised her head, turning to look at him with hollow eyes. "Alec, he knows," she said; "Bertie knows."

He did not ask her what. "Well," he said, steeling himself for what might come.

Averil let her forehead fall again upon her arm. Alec stood beside the bed, lacking words.

"We couldn't expect to go much longer without his knowing," she said in a muffled voice.

"But how——" Alec began.

"He saw your picture, the one I have in the case, and then his own face in the glass," Averil told him. "He guessed. It came to him all at once."

"And did you tell him it was true?"

"I had to; he made me do it," she defended herself.

"I see." There was even a shade in Alec's tone as if he welcomed this news, with its assuaging of the necessity for pretense. Then the man spoke stormily, "I don't know why you should suffer any more. You've had enough."

She sat up, looking into his face. "These last years have made it up to me, Alec, even though I was living in dread of this."

He bent and pulled her to her feet, and held her in his arms. "Have you been happy with me, Averil?"

"Yes, Alec, you know I have," she answered. "If it all has to stop for both of us now, I can say that I'm satisfied."

He held her off, and fixed her with startled eyes. "Do you mean—you think it ought to stop for both of us?"

"I don't know—perhaps it would be best——"

"You mean——"

"I don't know what I mean."

"That we ought to—die?"

"Oh, Alec!" She had her face against his shoulder.

"But that wouldn't do any good, would it?" he protested with white intensity. "There's Bert. He'd still be here."

"It might—save him," she said.

"How, Averil?" he asked gently.

"If we were gone, he might feel that things were made up for—that he could live and marry Caddie, and go on."

"Marry Caddie?" he echoed. "Had they—was that settled, then?"

"Yes."

Alec meditated, gazing out through the darkening window, at a tree tossed and beaten by rain. "I don't want to die," he said at last. "I want to live on and on—with you."

"It isn't what we want," she returned slowly. "It was once, and that's what has put us where we are."

He still meditated. "If we were sure it was the right

thing, we could do it." He crushed her in his arms. "But you—could you, Averil?" His face was close against hers. "We love each other. Who knows what may come—after?" His whisper stopped. He caught his breath sharply.

She clung to him. "I shall have to go alone," she thought.

After a while, Alec said, "I'll go and see him. Maybe I can do something."

"I don't know what it would be," she murmured. "I've been over there. He seems so hard, so unforgiving."

"We can't blame him for that," said Alec quickly. "It's hard—hard——"

"I know," she faltered.

He loosed his arms from her, and turned toward the door. "I'll go and see him," he said.

She tried to delay his going. "Won't you stay and eat?" she asked.

"No, I couldn't now," he answered. "And Averil, you know—there's just a chance that I may not come back."

She groaned, and held out her arms to him. He closed the door softly, and went away. With shaking hands, she lighted a lamp, fearing the dark. As she passed the looking-glass, she saw her own pale face where her son's had stood reflected. On her knees beside the bed, she tried to pray. What is God, she thought, that He should know these things? She remembered that she had read somewhere in the Bible, *Thou art of purer eyes than to behold evil, and canst not look on iniquity*. She seemed to see that petitions were of no avail. If she were to take any hold on God, she must rise to some higher sense of Love.

Alexander McLean splashed through water and mud in the driving storm. When he saw the light in the window of the house beside the lake, he gave a long gasping breath of relief. The little lane was overflowing with water at its lowest spot, but Alec was too much absorbed to notice. He swung himself from the car, and tramped up to the trellised door of the dining-room, where the rose vine swayed drippingly. He knocked, and then turned the knob. Hubert stood in the doorway leading to the front room. All the afternoon he had sat brooding, watching the grey and troubled waters creeping up the shore. He had eaten scantily, lighted his lamp, and had spent an hour pacing back and forth through the house. The two men stared uncertainly at each other. Through the open door the dampness drove in, with the incessant pouring and gurgling of the rain. The startled face of the boy showed the lines of his long misery. The lines hardened as he looked upon the face of the man. His shoulders were hunched, his body drooped. He held with both hands to the frame of the doorway. He did not speak.

"Bert!" said Alec thickly. Even at that tragic moment, there was in the heart of the man an unquenchable joy in openly claiming his son. "Bert, I hoped—I hoped that when you found it out, you'd be glad."

"Glad!" repeated the boy in an astounded voice. "What do you mean—glad?"

"Why, that you're—who you are." Alec was stirred by violent emotion. "You have cared for me, Bert." *Love* is a hard word to say, between men.

"Yes." The boy considered, dully. "I've thought as I've been sitting here this afternoon, that maybe, under

everything, I'd cared for you better than anyone else—until just yesterday, when Carraline and I—— Then I saw that she was—most of all——” He could not go on.

Alec made a sign of understanding. He closed the door and came forward, with eager affection in his gesture. Hubert flinched and stepped backward into the semi-darkness of the other room. “Can that be blotted out?” cried the older man, in suddenly unveiled excruciation.

“Yes.” The face of the boy was hard and contemptuous, and his voice was harsh with repulsion.

“Oh, it can't be, lad!”

“Why not?” cried the boy roughly. “What do you imagine can make up for—for what has happened?”

The man was humble in his answer. “Only one thing—that we *care* for you so much, your mother and I.”

“Care!” answered Hubert's tortured voice. “You didn't care, when you—when you—— Then you didn't think what I might suffer.”

“No. Folks don't think,” said Alec gravely. “But, Bert, ever since you came——

“Wait!” cried Hubert, leaning forward to look into his father's face. He had bethought himself of his question: “Did you kill my—did you kill Willard Faraday?”

Alec started, but did not move from where he stood. A perceptible pallor overspread his face. His eyes took on the look of one who sees the past, recalls a day when horror reigned supreme. “I expected you'd ask me that,” he said, not without dignity. “I'll tell you about it.” He began striding back and forth between door and door.

But Hubert would not wait. He rose to his full height,

which was not less than that of Alec, and advanced upon his father threateningly. "Did you, or didn't you?" His voice was lifted in fury.

"I did," said Alec. Hubert took a step nearer. "And didn't," the older man corrected himself. "I suppose I did. And yet I wasn't to blame. I didn't know—I——" He broke down, shivering. Then he controlled himself, and went on: "He accused me. He said I was your father—he had never said it out before. He dared me to deny it. I didn't say anything. I just stood looking. What could I say? Then he came for me with his axe. I picked up a big limb of a tree to ward it off. But he came at me like a crazy man. I struck out to defend myself. I suppose I hit him; I didn't know. The axe fell down. He laid there in the snow—you saw him. There was blood on the snow——"

"Yes." Bert saw the picture.

"Any court would clear me," said Alec calmly.

"How do I know this is true?" the younger man returned, insultingly dubious.

"You don't know," answered Alec. "You have my word."

"Your *word!*"

"Yes. Have I ever lied to you?"

"No, you haven't," said Hubert reluctantly. "Yes, you have, too," he added with fierceness. "You've lied all these years by keeping still."

Alec McLean sat down wearily in a chair beside the table. "Well, now you know all there is to know," he said. "What's your idea of what we all ought to do? How can we make it up to you? Do you think that somebody ought to die?"

Hubert stared at the floor, sullenly. "According to

right, mother ought to be the one," he said, choking. "She was the false one—deceiving her man, bringing another man's child into the world." Alec was silent, watching the young, tormented face. "But what good would it do?" Bert argued aloud with himself. "I'd be here. She's given life to me. Her dying wouldn't take it away."

"I guess we'd both be willing," said Alec gravely, "if it could do any good. But, Bert, what good would it do? Can't we all go on, just the same, caring for each other just as much? It doesn't make such an awful difference, does it, in the long run? And if you could have chosen wouldn't you rather belong to me, that you liked—you know you did, my boy—than to Willard, that you didn't like?"

It was a shrewd question. Bert could parry it only by a sneer. "You two'd get away pretty easy," he said, "if I'd only be as mushy as that."

"We haven't got away easy," the older man made heavy reply. "Let your mind rest, as far as that goes. If you wanted us to suffer, you have the satisfaction of knowing that we've suffered—all you'd want us to." His brevity was pregnant with years of regret and dread.

Bert was silent. He went into the dark front room, and walked about. The pounding of the storm seemed heavier and more ominous. At last he came to the door. "I guess you'd better go, Alec," he said. "I don't believe we've got much more to say. I thought once or twice that I'd kill you when I saw you. But I don't feel that way now. If anyone's got to go, I guess it ought to be—*me*."

Alec started up, protesting. Bert held him off. "It

won't be to-night," he said. "I promise. I've got to think it over. And I want to see Carraline again."

"You promise?" said Alec shakily. His hands went out toward his son.

"Yes. You can depend on it," the younger man answered. "You'd better go. It's an awful storm. Mother'll be worried about you." At the name, he put his hand to his lips to hide their trembling.

Alec went, baffled and dejected. The noise of his car was muffled in the wind and rain.

* * * * *

Hubert lay awake in the darkness, listening to the raging downpour. His thoughts dwelt by turns on the persons of his little group, on Libbie Hunt and Carraline, on Alec, on Averil, and on himself. He thought of his father and mother, hiding their love for years, repressing themselves, acting a part. Knowing love now, he could see what such repression implied. Try as he would, he could not completely uproot the pity which crept in between the crevices of his hate. All those years! How had they borne them, and turned a steady face to the world?

But greater than his pity for them was pity for himself. Ego rose up and towered. I am destroyed. My light has gone out. My life is ruined. I can never be what I hoped. The happiness that belonged to me has been snatched away. I am overcome, blighted, annihilated. Overwhelming sorrow for his own devastation shut out from the youth his vision of all else.

Tossing, aching, he scrutinized everything, from the beginning to the end. He saw how all his life and the

others' had led up to this hour. He surveyed his childhood, with its misery, which he now knew how to interpret as the fruit of Willard Faraday's jealous hate. He looked back upon the incidents which he could remember, such as the casting away of the watch and the breaking of the dishes, on his twelfth birthday. Now he knew why Willard had been roused to frenzy by another man's presents to the boy. He recalled other events. Something—he did not know what—had happened in a thunderstorm, one night when Alec had stayed at the farm during the harvesting. Then there were the perilous moments when Willard had bullied and beaten him, after he had been out with Alec in the woods along the Chain. He perceived the danger in which he and his mother had lived during that last year, danger from which he had been a mental sufferer, even though he had not been conscious of it. He remembered that Willard had read passages out of the Bible, about slaying his son, and had reiterated phrases about *sacrifice*.

It all passed before him like the succession of scenes in a moving picture. There were the times when Alec had taken down the portrait of his own mother, and had compared it with Hubert's face; and the times when Willard had clutched at the boy's arm and studied his countenance for a telltale likeness. A hundred such memories rushed upon him, beating against his mind, confusing him, agonizing him. He saw himself the victim of this monstrous iniquity of others, slain on the altar of secret sin. Slain. That was it. There was nothing now for him but death. If he went, the others could go on with their lives, atoning as they chose for

their transgressions, doing what they liked with what was left to them. He wanted to see Carraline again. This much he would grant himself. Then he would find a way to go. The thought of Carraline was an unbearable pang. She would grieve over him a little, he knew, lamenting the destruction of their hopes. But in the end she would find someone else, someone who had no stain upon his birth. The Ego wept hot tears upon the pillow, in the sounding dark of storm and isolation.

* * * * *

Monday morning came, wet and grey, but rainless. It was not till then that Libbie Hunt told Carraline the truth. She found the girl crying as she got the clothes ready for the wash. The unexplained absence of Bert on Sunday had hurt her pride and dimmed the glory of her lovely secret.

"Dear, I've got something to tell you," said Libbie, taking the children's soiled garments out of the hands of the girl. "Come into my room."

The pity in the mother's voice made Carraline cry out with the shrillness of terror. "It's about Bert. Oh, mother—is he——"

"No, no. Not the way you think." Libbie soothed her with a caress. "But he's hurt, he's terribly hurt in his heart, Caddie. He's found out something."

Carraline had sat down on the edge of the bed, in the weakness of relief. "Why, what could he find out?" she asked.

"Something about his father."

"How queer! What did Mr. Faraday ever do, mother, that was so bad?" asked the girl, wonderingly.

"Nothing, as I know," Libbie answered. "Well, what

he did was bad enough. But, Caddie, Willard wasn't Bert's father."

"Wasn't—why, what do you mean, mother?" Caddie was aghast.

"I mean, his father was someone else. His father is Alec McLean."

Bewilderment gave way to horror in the girl's eyes. "Are you *sure*?" she asked, almost angrily.

Libbie nodded.

"Did you just find it out?" asked Carraline, "or have you known it a long time?"

"A long time," said Libbie slowly. "I guess I don't know just when I was sure."

"And Bert knows it now—is that what you mean?"

"Yes."

"Oh, poor Bert!" Carraline's mouth quivered. She saw his mother as he would see her—the Scarlet Woman. She wrung her hands. "What is he going to do? Have you seen him, mother?"

"Yes, I saw him yesterday. Averil and Alec have both been over. I don't know what he'll do. He's half wild with it. Caddie, I'm afraid——"

Caddie screamed. "Oh, mother, he *wouldn't*!"

"I don't know."

"I must go to him. I must go." She ran to the door.

Libbie detained her. "I told him it didn't make any difference. He can't see it. He thinks it's ruined your life and his. He thinks he's a kind of an outcast."

"Poor Bert!"

"Wait," said Libbie. "Don't you want me to hitch up the horse and buggy for you? You can't walk. The road's full of mud."

"I can't wait," cried the girl. "I'd rather walk, any-

way. I can think what to say." She was running down the stairs.

* * * * *

When she came within sight of the lake, she was horrified to see the height of the water. The lower road, where the farmers drove in their teams for a drink, was entirely obliterated; but the upper highway was intact. Caddie made her way swiftly beyond obstructing trees, until she could get a view of the house. She saw that the water was halfway up the front yard. The lane was under water, and the greater part of the lower field. Only by making a long detour could she find land dry enough to walk upon, in order to come up to the house. At first the place seemed deserted. She breathed a prayer of gratitude when she saw Bert come out upon the porch. She halloosed to him. He came down and toward her without a word. "What makes the water so high?" she called. "It's awful. Aren't you scared?"

He shook his head. "I guess it's the rain. I can't worry." He had other things to worry about.

They were putting off what they had to say. They stood looking at each other under the drenched acacias. "Bert, let me talk to you," said the girl, pleadingly, frightened by the hardness of his face.

"I don't want you to," he said. "You'd carry me away by my feelings, not by what I know." He held aloof from her.

"Do you know what is right?" she asked abruptly.

"No, I don't." He spoke in a tone of surprise.

"Well, then, let me talk to you."

"What can you say?" he returned harshly. "Talking can't make black white."

"No, but it can show you what's white, when you think it's black."

"Maybe," he sulked.

She ran impetuously to him, and put her hand on his. With a swift relaxing of his resolves, he caught her in his arms, holding her as if in passionate defiance of death. She struggled free. "No, I'm not going to argue with you like that," she panted; "not with my body, not with your love for me. I want you to see with your mind. I want you to see——"

He stepped away from her. They went up to the porch together, and sat down on the settle under the window. Carraline could not wait to speak. "It doesn't matter who your father was, Bert," she said.

He stared at her in amaze. "Don't you honestly *care?*" he asked. His face lost something of its tensity.

"No. What difference does it make to me? You are *you*."

"But——" he began, and stopped.

"What?"

"But if you married me, you'd be marrying a—a——"

"I'd be marrying you."

"Wouldn't you be ashamed? Wouldn't you feel degraded?"

"Why should I?" she replied.

"Your children—our children——" He looked away.

"There'd be a stain."

"They should never know."

"But it would be there."

"Where?" she asked him, with sudden sharpness.

"Why, in them," he answered confusedly.

"How?"

"The same as it's in me."

"How is it in you?" The girl's voice did not lose its directness.

"Why, why——" He stared at her in impatience.

"Where is it in you?"

"Here." He put his hand to his breast.

"If it's there, you'd better have it cut out," she said.

He rose, raging. "You can make fun of me!"

Tears were running down her face. "Oh, Bert!"

He stood before her. "It's in my soul," he said tragically.

"Soul!" She caught his hand. "My darling, it couldn't touch you. It couldn't come near you. What you are, what you love me with—that's your soul, that's you. The disgrace—if you want to call it so—it couldn't ever touch you."

He stood irresolute. Libbie Hunt had said something like that. "I don't see——" he stammered.

Carraline was going on. "Can't you see that what you really are is up above and out of things like this? It's like our love—that's outside of it, and outside of everything else that's wrong."

"Yes," he conceded, in a dazed way.

"It's how you look at things," she continued. "I've always said, you know, that relations are near or far off from you, according to how you care. People that you love, and that love you and understand you, they're your relations. It doesn't make any difference about being born. I saw that when I was only a little girl, when mother told me and explained to me what the Bible means when it say, 'The flesh profiteth nothing.'"

Bert was listening now, reluctantly, but intently. "I never thought about it," he said. "You told me, but I wouldn't pay any attention."

"Think about it now," she begged. "You see, it's how you look at things. If you'd been kidnapped when you were a baby, and now you'd found out that your folks were different from what you supposed, would you feel—the way you think you're feeling now?"

"Probably not." Hubert moved uncomfortably, but met her gaze as honestly as he could.

"You'd see that you are you, just the same, wouldn't you?"

"I guess so."

"And then there's the justice of it." The girl divined that she was arguing a case which might involve the issues of life and death. "Is it right that a person should suffer for what someone else has done?"

"No, not exactly, but——"

"If John Jones, over in the next county, does something wrong—steals, we'll say—do you feel as if you've got to suffer all your life for it?"

"Well, but that——" he began.

"Do you?" she persisted.

"No, of course not."

"Well, if a man a little nearer—say Martin Hendricks over here—did something wicked, would you think you had to make yourself miserable over it—go off and take your own life, or something?" The voice of the girl shook, and the hand on the back of the old settle was trembling.

"No, of course not." The young man's face was less hard and more thoughtful.

"And if a man a little nearer yet—Alec McLean, for instance—does something wrong, have you got to suffer for it, and feel you're disgraced and an outcast, and that everything is ruined for ever?"

He saw her logic. He swallowed hard. "N-no, I don't suppose it is very sensible," he said in a tone of surprise at his own admission. There was a pause. "But there's something else," he began; "if they're your own folks, it seems more awful."

"I don't see why," interpolated Carraline.

"Well, maybe it isn't. But, anyway, it makes you feel scared." He gulped. "Scared of women. Is there one of 'em that you could trust? If—if I married you—or any other woman—wouldn't I feel that you—that she——"

"Bert!" The girl reached for his hand, and held it to her cheek. "You know that isn't true. You know it isn't worth considering."

He did not withdraw his hand. The lines of his face were softening. But he must uncover all his heart. "How can I like—love—Alec and my mother any more?" he said brokenly. "I thought they were so—good."

"They are, too; you know they are," said the girl in a low voice. It had not at first been easy for her to make this concession herself. "They've done wrong, terribly wrong, and I'm sure they know it. But who are you, to go judging them? Are you God?"

He looked blank. "Hardly," he muttered.

"You act as if you thought you were. Here you stay, and make them come bowing down on their knees to you, as if you were some idol or god or some such thing. You act as if you were perfect yourself, as if you had a right to set yourself up and be a judge for them. Did God ever say that you were to take His place, and decide how wrong they were, and how they ought to be punished?"

Bert's jaw dropped. "I should say not," he answered hurriedly.

"How do you know you're so awfully much better than they are—I mean, as a flesh man?"

The mind of the boy was whirling. He thought that he had been thinking, during these last hard days; but now he was thinking as he had never done before. He began to see himself as small and arrogant and self-righteous and unforgiving.

Carraline came and stood beside him. "There's more I want to say." There was a shy determination in her voice. "About God. Isn't God the real Father of everybody? Where do we all come from? From fathers and mothers in the flesh, in a way, of course. But that's not the real thing. There's a mind in us—a soul, spirit—call it what you want to—it's not in the flesh. Who can touch it? Where does it come from? From God—that's the only place that soul or spirit could start. God is the Father of all that's real in us—all that's mind, that's spirit, that's *us*, our *own selves*. It doesn't matter how we're born. I know that's true. I know that's why Jesus said, 'Call no man your father upon the earth; for one is your Father, which is in heaven.' "

Bert stood silent, listening. He had never thought much about religious things. His mind was virgin to the touch of truth. He threw off his doubts, his self-pity, his agony and torment. He saw a new heaven and a new earth, and rested in a new sense of life and love. There came to him the vision which comes to some of us once or twice in a lifetime, to others not at all. He saw himself as the offspring of an Infinite Spirit, which gives infinite life to all, and withholds from none. He

saw himself the child of eternal beauty and compassion, sharing the wonder of the goodness of God, the Father to all mankind. It was a moment of supreme exaltation, a moment never to be forgotten, the memory of which was henceforth to transfigure what he should know of life.

He turned to the girl beside him. She came sobbing to his arms. He held her now not with despair and passion, but with tenderness and hope. "Bert, Bert," she was saying, against his heart, "are you going to give me up for what somebody else did, long ago, for a mistake—for nothing?"

"No, no!" He spoke in wonderment at himself. "I can't see what I was thinking of. I can't see why I didn't understand before."

* * * * *

Half an hour later, Hubert pulled the boat out of the bushes, where it had been dashed by the storm, and rowed Carraline across the submerged lane and road to the solid highway. "It looks pretty bad," she said. They were glad to speak of mundane things, after their exalted hour. "It doesn't seem as if the storm could do all that. And, oh, Bert, Willard's grave is under water!"

Hubert did not answer. In a dim way, he felt that something of the past had been wiped out by the stealing flood.

He was going home with Carraline. After a while he would seek out his family, but not now. As the two walked along over the familiar road, which they had trodden together from their earliest remembrance, they did not find much to say. At last Bert, like a hermit emerging from his cave, began to think of the personages

of their little world. "How's the old man?" he asked. "I haven't thought about him for two or three days."

"He doesn't seem very well," said the girl sympathetically. "He's sat in his chair for two days, all kind of sunk down. He doesn't seem to care what's going on. We're worried about him."

When they reached the house, Libbie came to meet them, her plain and faded face lovely in its kindness. "I'm so glad," she said, and kissed her daughter on the cheek. She met the eyes of Bert with understanding.

The old man had been sitting bowed in his chair beside the window. He rose now, weak and tottering. Recognition and triumph glowed through his obscured intelligence. "It's Bert, ain't it?" he said. "Boy, I remember now. I wanted to tell you. I cut it through—I cut through the place between the lakes."

"You what?" cried Hubert in consternation.

"I dug through the place—you know—where the lakes come together. They're all one now. The water's rushing there like a mill race, only bigger. It's fine."

With a look at the comprehending faces of the women, Bert turned to the telephone. Carraline ran to steady and soothe the excited old man.

Bert called Alec McLean on the telephone. It seemed good, in spite of the tension of the moment, to be speaking in a natural way. "Alec, this is Bert," he said. "I'm at Mrs. Hunt's. Yes. Mr. Gleason has cut through the neck of land between the lakes. That's why the water's rising. Yes, yes. He says he dug it through—I don't know how or when. Will you meet me at the log house with the car? We'll have to see if anything can be done. All right. I'm starting."

With a word to Carraline, "I'll be back as soon as

I can," he ran out of the house, hurrying to the point where he was to meet Alec. If he had not been so taken up with his own misery, he reflected, he would long ago have made out this explanation of the height of the water. He remembered how the old man had dwelt upon the possibility of opening a channel between the lakes, and his confusion as to what would follow.

Alec was at the log house before him. They greeted each other as if nothing had changed, in the matter-of-fact manner of men. "I guess the farm's gone, Alec," said Hubert as the car started.

"We'll see how bad things are," Alec returned. He sped the car over the rough little-used road. When they reached the edge of the woods, the men got out and walked through the wet trees and bushes, dull beneath low clouds. Before they came to the place which they were seeking, they heard the angry rushing and swirling of the water. Stepping out to the open space, they saw where the havoc had been wrought. The channel which the old man had cut with his long secret toil had been widened by the force of the water and the devastation of the storm. A sloping wall of water ran from lake to lake. Small trees lay uprooted in the churning flood, and muddied underbrush strained at its roots. The larger trees still stood, with water flowing deep around their boles. The two men were for the moment unnerved by the hopelessness of damming this sliding torrent.

Alec put his arm across the shoulders of his son. He knew that it would not be shaken off. "You're right, Bert," he said grimly. "I guess the most of the farm's gone. We can't get stuff enough in here in time to stop it before the best fields are overflowed and the water's all around the house."

Hubert caught his breath. His farm! His precious farm, and the house into which he was sometime to bring his wife! It seemed at first that he could not bear the loss. But after a little he knew that he could. "I can stand it, Alec," he said. He felt as if he himself had been called back from death, and that he had learned more than he could ever lose, of life and love.

"We'll get what help we can," said McLean; "cut down trees and haul stone and dirt. But I don't know how much good it'll do. Shall we go back now? Do you want to see your mother?"

"Yes, I want to," the boy replied. "Carraline—she's helped me a good deal. I think I see things different now." As they were walking back through the woods, Hubert said, "Willard Faraday's grave is under water." Alec started. "You know what you told me about my—about Willard," the boy went on. "I shan't ever tell that, even to Carraline." Alec nodded gratefully. "But I guess you'd better tell my mother."

"I always thought it was better not to," answered the man. "It might be an awful worry to her. That's why I've never let her know."

"I don't believe it would worry her half as much as wondering," Hubert replied. He seemed to discern with painful clearness the terrors which had dwelt in his mother's mind.

"Maybe you're right," said Alec.

It was not until they were driving past the log house that they spoke again. "You know, if the farm's gone, you can start over again, somewhere else," the older man remarked. "There's money enough, and I'd like to do that for you, lad. I'd rather than to have you get it from—Willard."

"And I'd rather have it from you now," said the boy in a low voice.

At the door of his house, Alec stopped, with his hand on the knob. "You'll be easy on your mother, won't you, Bert?" he said. "She's had it pretty hard."

"I know." Hubert's throat was aching, and his eyes were full of tears. He could not tell his father what he had learned of the Fatherhood of God, and of his own untouched individuality. "Alec, I've been a fool, but I've learned something. I see now that everybody's got his own life to answer for, and that I have all I can do to look after mine. And we've all got to go on living."

Averil McLean, huddled on a sofa in the living-room, rose to her feet with incredulous joy as the two men came in.

Deacidified using the Bookkeeper process.
Neutralizing Agent: Magnesium Oxide
Treatment Date:

APR

1996



BOOKKEEPER

PRESERVATION TECHNOLOGIES, INC.

1114 William Flinn Highway
Glenshaw, PA 15116-2657
412-486-1161

OCT 7 1924

LIBRARY OF CONGRESS



00022305591

6